
NOVEL
6
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FAILURE FRAME
I BECAME THE STRONGEST AND ANNIHILATED EVERYTHING
WITH LOW-LEVEL SPELLS

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SERAS ASHRAIN
MIMORI TOUKA


TAKAO HIJIRI
"IF I WERE TO TELL YOU THAT I HAVE ROMANTIC FEELINGS FOR YOU, WHAT WOULD YOU SAY?"
SOGOU AYAKA
Ayaka noticed Hijiri's eyes were trying to tell her something—she was looking at the door.
Ah, I get it. There's someone outside. I can feel their presence. That's the reason Hijiri wants me to go along with what it is she's saying.
Ayaka took a deep breath before answering.


"SO, LIKE, WHAT I'M SAYING IS, LIKE... LONG AS YOU CAN GET THE RIGHT BUFFS AND DEBUFFS ON EVERYONE...
"AIN'T NO SKILL IN THE WORLD MORE POWERFUL."
IKUSABA ASAGI

FAILURE FRAME

I BECAME THE STRONGEST AND ANNIHILATED EVERYTHING WITH LOW-LEVEL SPELLS

NOVEL 6

WRITTEN BY
KAORU SHINOZAKI

ILLUSTRATED BY
KWKM

Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

HAZURE WAKU NO [JOUTAI IJOU SUKIRU] DE SAIKYOU NI NATTA ORE GA SUBETE WO JUURIN SURU MADE VOL. 6

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Illustrations by KWKM

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AFTERWORD

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Prologue

THE BATTLEFIELD COULD BE summed up in a single world—gruesome. Corpses upon corpses upon corpses—they lay in heaps too high to count. Roughly 90 percent of the dead belonged to the army of the Demon Empire, the rest to the eastern army.

"So th-this is the power of an S-class hero…"

A knight of the White Wolf Riders raised his sword arm, feeling weak and exhausted. His eyes were transfixed by the scene spread out before him, the ogre soldiers brutally cut down and butchered across the field. Here and there their flesh was seared, and thin wisps of smoke rose from their remains. Others were impaled by shards of ice.

All this carnage was the work of Takao Hijiri, and the unique skill that had awoken within her. Now she was able to harness two different elemental aspects of the wind…and she used them on the battlefield to lay waste to the enemy with long range destruction.

"Fire Wind."

"Blizzard Wind."

Takao Hijiri quickly regained control of her breathing with an indifferent sigh. Takao Itsuki, her little sister, looked on with great admiration. Itsuki knew that Hijiri must have expended amazing reserves of energy during the battle. But even though Hijiri was tired, she didn't let any exhaustion show on her face.

When the others look at her, they must think she didn't even break a sweat. I've always been by her side—I'm the only one who can notice these things—the only one that can see that she's tired.

"Expected nothin' less of you, Aneki!" Itsuki said with a smile, feeling more respect for her older sister than she ever had before.

The Takao sisters and their eastern army had been steadily pushed back, retreating south to the Plains of Nord. It was there that reinforcements from the Sacred Alliance joined them—Ulza forces from the south and west that had been kept in reserve. Led by the Monster Slayer Knights, the army from Ulza helped push the eastern front back…until the Demon King himself appeared on the frontlines.

The tide of the battle turned in an instant.

The colossal frame of his purple and gold body was built like a living fortress. He had a horrendous presence, vulgar and vivid like some carnivorous flower from the very depths of hell, magnificent and obscene all at once. Bulbous spots protruded from the surface of his skin like disgusting gummy sweets that glowed with a pale light. His body was covered with misshapen limbs and appendages—horns, arms, crab-like legs that writhed furiously, and wings. In the center of it all was an unsettling humanoid shadow, fused to the rest of the body but defiant of any attempt to gaze directly upon the Demon King.

The monstrosity spoke not a single word, just spawned monsters ever faster to reinforce his army in the field. The beasts were birthed from the glowing pustules all over his body. They swelled and burst, spilling clumps of monsters out like fish onto the deck of a trawler. Then the newly born monsters stood, covered head to toe in sticky mucus, and took up armor and weapons from their fallen comrades before charging into the fight. No matter how many the humans defeated—the monsters' numbers did not wane.

The Takao Sisters and White Wolf Riders put up a valiant fight, but could do nothing to push back the waves of monsters. The unrelenting tide slowly wore them down, even though Takao Hijiri's presence gave them reason for hope. The kill count of her unique skill was unmatched, but their army needed just one extra push.

With the army of humans growing exhausted as time wore on, they wondered what would happen if the Demon King himself decided to venture out to the front line, and most of the Sacred Alliance soldiers prayed fervently that it would never happen. Though he remained in the rear, his immense form was identifiable even to those far across the battlefield. At that range his overwhelming essence had almost no effect on the human troops in battle, so they could fight with their full strength. That could all change in an instant if he decided to wade into the fray. If that happened, only the Takao sisters would remain to stem the tide.

Then two magical horses appeared—the Goddess Vicius, with an S-class hero by her side.

In the heat of battle Hijiri used her unique skill as a wall, spread wide to protect her allies. The bodies of dead monsters piled up before her in a hellish scene.

Meanwhile, Kirihara Takuto stood on the frontline and stared up at the sky. Before him lay a huge mound of corpses, and behind him the remaining soldiers of the eastern army. He stood at the border, a line dividing the living from the dead.

The Chief Rider of the White Wolf Riders, Sogude Sigmus rode up to the Goddess' side, and looked onward at Kirihara's back.

"So... What do you think, Vicius?" he asked.

"Marvelous results, I have to say," she replied with a wide smile, lightly gripping the reins of her fresh white horse. Nyantan rode by her side, followed by the Takao sisters.

"The Demon King has retreated, and we haven't lost a single S-class hero," said Sogude, narrowing his gaze and looking out across the field. "Not yet. Part of me thinks this might be too good to be true."

"They have seen two of our S-class heroes' unique skills in battle and decided on a hasty retreat, I believe." The Goddess remained strong in her conviction that this was a victory for the eastern army.

"…But this doesn't feel right to you, does it?"

Itsuki listened to them talk, and looked again to her sister.

They're suspicious of the timing of this retreat. Aneki said the exact same thing…

Itsuki remembered the conversation they'd had, once it was clear the Demon King was retreating from battle.

"He just freakin' ran!" she'd said to her sister. "Like, what a letdown!"

"It did not appear that he withdrew for fear of our unique skills."

"Y'think? I figured he got scared and made tracks…"

"He showed no sign of advancing to our ranks in any way during the battle," Hijiri had observed. "But there was a moment—I felt some hesitancy from him. Yes, as if something quite irregular had occurred."

"Really? I, like, totally didn't feel anything at all," said Itsuki.

"More of a hunch, really… Perhaps the Demon King truly did intend to crush this eastern army of ours. But he might also have wanted to draw the Goddess and S-class heroes away from the southern front by revealing himself here."

"Whoa, Aneki! You're like a strategist!"

"It is just a feeling—I have no evidence, of course."

Itsuki remembered the way her sister had spoken to her then as she looked now at Kirihara, his back to her, standing alone on the battlefield.

"…Aneki, you said the Demon King didn't like, freak out and run away 'cause he saw your unique skills, right?"

"Indeed, I did."

"But, like, I wonder… When I look at him over there, I mean you too, Aneki, but… Aren't you S-class heroes like a real-deal threat to the Demon King?"

Kirihara stood alone under a blue sky as countless golden dragons made of pure energy criss-crossed through the air above him, trailing bright streams of light behind them. Half of the monster corpses that lay before him had body parts missing, as if sections were simply shaved away.

The dragons rolled as they flew, masters of the sky, scattering sparks as they went. During the battle they roared, raged, and slaughtered the monsters below. It was a massacre, with ogre soldiers completely devoured by the merciless fire of the golden dragons unleashed by the golden hero. Now they lingered above.

"Demon King ran, did he?" Kirihara clicked his tongue and looked back over his shoulder at his allies, nothing but supreme confidence on his face. "Well, at least we're finally here. Did you all see me in action?

"It's inconceivable that you couldn't have. It'll be burned into your memory. Today is the day your king begins, Kirihara begins, I begin. Now…" He raised his right hand, pointing the palm out to those behind him, as if flaunting his strength. "This is Kirihara!"

Chapter 1:
From Destruction to Homecoming

IT WAS EVENING. A meeting between the surviving captains was scheduled to begin in one hour, to discuss their future plans.

The battle was won, but reports were still trickling in from the surviving armies. Commanders shouted orders to their subordinates to set a perimeter and guard it well. There was a possibility that monsters still lurked within or outside the citadel.

At the summons of the Princess of the Holy Empire of Neah, I entered the Neahan camp with Eve and Slei by my side. They were asked to wait outside the Princess' tent, and I told them that we should do as asked for now.

So Seras revealed her true identity, eh? There are advantages to that decision. It makes it easier for us to explain our presence on the battlefield for one. "Seras Ashrain, who once served the Princess Cattlea, hastened to join the battle in order to aid her"—that's a good reason for the Lord of the Flies Brigade to be here. Among other advantages.

In any case, I'm not going to complain about getting to meet the princess without all the usual annoying fuss that would normally involve.

Her tent seemed similar to one that nomads might use. I ducked my head through the flap and saw chairs set out inside.

"Welcome. Please, enter." In the seat furthest from the entrance sat a silver-haired girl with curls in her hair. "My name is Cattlea Straumms."

Her gray eyes were thoughtful, and the military garb she wore was elegant. Yet her attitude was firm as a soldier's, unshakeable.

She was flanked by two holy knights, and in front of her was Seras, dressed in her Fly Swordsman outfit, minus the mask. Seras looked calm, but from the redness in her eyes, I could tell that her reunion with the princess had been emotional.

She walked toward me, lowering her voice to whisper in my ear. "I'm so sorry. As I'm sure you're already aware, I let slip my—"

"I know. Don't worry about it," I murmured back.

"Thank you." Seras looked down at her feet, placed one hand over her chest, and clenched it tightly. Then she raised her head,

trying to regain her composure. “The only information I have given up concerning you is that you are a former Ashint member who saved me from the Black Dragon Knights. That I owe you my life, in any case.”

“Leave the rest to me.”

Seras looked up at me in agreement, and stood by my side. I turned to face the princess, and bent down on one knee.

“I believe this is the first time I have had the honor of meeting you—my name is Belzegea, leader of the Lord of the Flies Brigade. As I announced during the battle, this group of mine was once known by another name: Ashint,” I said, carefully keeping my tone respectful.

“Belzegea... The very same name as the Lord of the Flies of legend, is it not?” asked Cattlea.

“I have borrowed from those legends, yes.”

“Then I suppose Seras is now a loyal retainer of the Lord of the Flies—The *Sword of Belzegea* perhaps?” The princess asked with a chuckle. “I believe the most faithful subordinate of the Lord of the Flies was the first of his sworn, Asteria. When Seras rushed to my side, I believe that was the name she claimed as her own. It brings me joy to see her so trusted by the Lord of the Flies himself.”

I sensed the princess stand up from her chair.

“In any case, you were responsible for our narrow victory,” she went on. “As commander of the army of Neah, allow me to express my gratitude. Had you not rushed to our aid, we would certainly all have perished.”

“I am thankful only that we made it in time to rescue you from peril, your Highness.”

“Cursed-magic, though… I do not understand the theory behind it, but it truly does appear to be a terrifying power. The army of stone statues, that black many-legged steed of yours...and your two Fly Swordsmen have such immense fighting prowess. Yet I must say there are some slight inconsistencies between your behavior, and the reports I once heard of Ashint.”

The explanation was quick on my lips. “Well, Ashint was internally divided into two factions. My own faction was…in the minority. The others dreamed of walking out onto the grand stage of world affairs, but we wished for the opposite. It is better if we go on as we always have, existing in the shadows. In the end, our faction discarded the name of Ashint and resolved to continue as the Lord of the Flies Brigade. We seek to control the world from behind a veil.”

“Did the other Ashint faction simply allow you to leave? I cannot

imagine they would be willing to let you go quite so easily, considering the great power you possess."

"Very perceptive, your Highness. They strongly opposed our departure, and... Well, I'm afraid I will have to leave the rest of the story to your imagination."

The world is aware that Ashint disappeared suddenly. Maybe they pursued the Lord of the Flies Brigade into the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters and were wiped out by the monsters within. Perhaps they were caught in an ambush and wiped out by the other faction. I just need to be vague enough, use the rumors to our advantage, and let others supply their own details.

"After our separation from Ashint, we heard news that you were to lead the forces of Neah in the upcoming battle against the Demon King's armies. Considering Seras' affection for you, we decided to try and assist. We had intended to enter the battle as mercenaries. However…"

The princess nodded in understanding.

I can't tell if she really believes what we're saying yet, though.

She took a single step to me.

"Sir Belzegea, arise if you would. You are hardly a soldier under my command."

I stood and Cattlea looked up at me. The princess was a head shorter than I was.

"I must express my gratitude to you for saving Seras' life," she said.

I bowed. "I could hardly live with myself if I had allowed her to fall into Bakoss hands."

"Which is why Seras feels an obligation to serve and follow you, Sir Belzegea. Has she told you the details of her story?"

"Regarding her escape from Neah? She has, yes."

"Sir Belzegea," said the princess, clearly looking to change the topic. "I understand you came to assist me…but you've no intention of serving by my side permanently, do you?"

Seras' true identity has been revealed to the world. News of Seras Ashrain's survival will spread from the army of Neah no matter what—that can't be stopped now. The Goddess already had an eye on her when she was still just a Holy Knight of Neah, too. So long as Seras is by the princess' side, the Goddess is going to try and take her away.

That means we can't stay here for much longer. I want to reduce the

chance that I might run into the Goddess as much as possible. In the battle I used my "cursed-magic" and those magic weapons of Erika's to try and muddy the waters. The plan was to conceal our identities. But with Seras' secret out, that plan's going up in smoke.

That foul Goddess is definitely going to be interested in our Lord of the Flies Brigade... So, we need to find somewhere else to be as soon as possible.

My decision made, I responded, "I intend to leave this place before dawn tomorrow, and return to my own journey. I have my own goals I must pursue. But, if Seras insists on staying by your side, then I will honor her wishes."

Seras looked a little taken aback, and hurriedly tried to speak. "I __"

"At present Seras is your *sword*—at least that is how she described her position to me," said the princess, interrupting Seras before she had the chance to speak.

It's going to be dangerous, but if Seras is firm then there's nothing I can do to stop her. I'm on a journey of personal revenge, after all. I've always said she could leave whenever she wants. It's just…if she chose to remain by the princess' side, I would have concerns about that foul Goddess and her plans for Seras. I do get the impression that this princess might be able to stand up to Vicius, but…

"Would you have Seras to return to your side, as a member of your Holy Knights of Neah, your Highness?"

"No." She smiled. "Even if she should return to me, the Goddess will no doubt attempt to use her for something untoward. We would not be together in truth. My precious Seras would be consumed by whatever intentions that Vicius has for her."

So the princess isn't exactly fond of the Goddess either, eh? She seems to know a lot about her too—might as well ask.

"My apologies for the impolite question, but... Do you harbor some ill will toward the Goddess Vicius by any chance, your Highness?"

"I do." Her eyes softened, and I turned to look at Seras. She gave a start and quickly touched her right ear.

Right ear—that's our signal for when someone is telling the truth. Cattlea really doesn't like the Goddess. But then…the princess knows Seras can detect lies as well.

"You answered simply, to make it easier for Seras to determine your statement was true, I take it?" asked the princess. "That makes

these matters simpler now, doesn't it? If we're both speaking from the heart, no need to mince words, don't you agree?"

Seras looked a little awkward, and I saw a glimpse of guilt on her face at having used her ability on the princess.

"So, you don't want Seras to meet with the Goddess?" I asked.

"Of course not. Why do you think I ordered her to leave me and escape from my castle in Neah in the first place?" She walked toward me and took my hands. "And so… May I leave Seras in your care?"

"Are you certain that I'm worthy of that?"

"That seems rather immaterial given how deeply she has fallen for you."

The two holy knights at the princess' side flushed red, and I heard them startle.

"Princess?!" said Seras, as if she'd been completely blindsided.

"Is there some problem?" Cattlea just kept smiling, her eyes fixed on mine.

"No. I treasure Seras too, of course," I answered.

"Is she quite special to you?"

"Yes."

"And you are looking after her needs as a woman, as you should?"

"I…intend to. Yes."

The princess gave a pleased nod and her smile widened. "Then I'm glad to hear the feeling is mutual."

"Sir T—"

"Seras."

…She was definitely about to call me Sir Too-ka just now.

The princess' mouth twisted into a wry smile.

"Being able to tell when someone is telling the truth can be rather trying at times, can't it?" The princess released my hands and slowly backed away from me, looking over at Seras, whose expression betrayed how fast her heart was beating.

I suppose the princess predicted this might happen.

"Before you came in, I gave Seras some news. Would you like to hear what I told her?"

After the battle was over, Seras had hardly given the princess

any information about me, but Cattlea, on the other hand, seemed to have told Seras a lot.

"Very well, let's hear it," I said with a nod.

"Seras, will you tell Sir Belzegea of my intentions?"

"Ah, y-yes, of course," replied Seras respectfully, steeling her expression. "If there is anything she can do to help, Princess Cattlea intends to assist us, as thanks for our help in battle. …And to thank my master for saving me from the Black Dragon Knights."

I suppose I saved Seras from the princess' father as well. The Holy Emperor of Neah was the one who ordered Seras' death in the first place. But the princess might have already realized that from the things Seras has told her and her own suspicions.

She can get angry when she needs to. As an ally I'm glad to have her on my side, but as an adversary she would be trouble.

"At present my main priority is reclaiming Neah from Bakossi hands and rebuilding," said the princess. "I *am* grateful, but please understand that my assistance is limited by circumstance."

"I understand," I replied. "If anyone asks where we went, could you tell them we traveled north?"

"North?"

"Yes. If you could simply explain that we plan on traveling north to anyone who asks."

"A small favor indeed."

Considering that we're heading west, this is just one way of sowing confusion. If the princess tells the Goddess exactly what I just told her, she's not exactly lying either. If it comes down to accusations, she can just claim that "Belzegea" fed her false information.

With that taken care of, I requested a few more small things from the princess while I was at it. I was grateful, but there wasn't a lot I needed from her.

"Is that truly all you ask?" she asked when I was done, a tad deflated that my requests were so minor.

"The Lord of the Flies Brigade rushed to your defense because we felt we should save you, not in pursuit of a reward."

If I I thought she could grant it, my request would be for her to help us hide any trace that we were ever here. We have more than enough food, water and money on hand.

"But we do need to disappear. I don't believe we will be able to assist you again in the future."

“That will be no issue. If the Inner Circle demons who appeared in this last battle are to be believed, the only enemy we have yet to face more powerful than Einglanz is the Demon King himself. The greatest threat to our southern defense was defeated right here, just outside the citadel.” The princess smiled confidently. “Not to mention…with Ayaka Sogou leading the assembled heroes, I do not believe that our front will not crumble quite so easily.”

She’s right, Sogou is so much stronger now, and it looks as if she can change the size and shape of her weapons at will. After defeating that Inner Circle demon, she must’ve gotten a lot of EXP. So long as the Demon King doesn’t show up here, Sogou should be able to deal with anything that comes their way. The southern front hasn’t fallen—it has enough strength left to rebuild while the Demon King is off fighting in the east.

“In any case, I believe the danger has passed, at present,” said the princess. “I shall endeavor to handle your pressing requests immediately.” She then addressed one of her attending knights. “Dorothy, call in Makia, will you?”

The holy knight did as she was ordered, and returned a few moments later with another holy knight in tow. Makia was short in stature, and her outfit was unusually cut for a knight, almost as if she were a fan of gothic lolita fashion. She had long black hair and red eyes, and although she was quite short, it didn’t look like she was a kid.

“This is Lady Makia of the house Renaufia. She was once vice-captain, and is now the Captain of the Holy Knights of Neah and she took Seras’ place after her disappearance.”

“Hmph, despite my looks I’m older than Lady Seras, too,” said the captain, puffing out her chest. Seras gave her a wry smile.

“With this adorable outward appearance of hers, she often deals with…*misunderstandings*,” Seras added. “But Makia is a superbly talented swordswoman. She is also one of the few to have mastered incantation spells on the continent, and—”

“Lady Seras.” Makia interrupted, winking and pointing outside of the tent with a thumb over her shoulder. “As ordered, we’ve finished retrieving the debris of that war chariot of yours.”

I looked at Seras, and she bowed once lightly in my direction.

“I believed that you wouldn’t choose to abandon the chariot here,” Seras told me. “So I had the holy knights retrieve it for us. The knights themselves are the only ones who carried out this task, and as their former captain I can vouch for their secrecy.”

We needed to remove any trace that the Lord of the Flies

Brigade was ever there. I intended to deal with the remains of the war chariot personally. It seemed that my capable vice-captain had already taken the initiative.

"Thanks for your quick thinking, Seras," I said.

Her eyes flitted gracefully down, and she bowed again. "I am honored to receive the compliment."

"Right then, Seras... Just to make everything clear, you intend on continuing with us as a member of this Lord of the Flies Brigade?"

"I do. I have no hesitation in that regard." There wasn't a shred of doubt in her voice.

"If that's the case, then you should accomplish your other goal."

…To say goodbye to Cattlea Straumss—to the princess herself. My initial plan was for her to do this in secret, with just the two of them, but with her identity revealed, that wasn't necessary.

Seras turned to face Cattlea.

"Princess… Might I have a moment of your time?"

Cattlea's eyes softened, and she smiled as well. "Of course, Seras."

She has such a natural smile when she's around Seras. Maybe that's the real her—on the inside.

"If the time would allow it, I should like to speak with you until morning." Tears formed in the corners of Seras' eyes.

"We'll be outside—please, take your time." I turned my back on the two of them and left. Makia and the other holy knights followed me out. The night was dark, and fires were lit inside the camp and out. I'd walked some way from the tent, when Makia's voice stopped me.

"Is there some reason you won't tell us who you are?" she called after me.

"I have my reasons."

My voice is altered and I'm hiding my face—makes sense she'd be curious. I don't have any transformation powers like Seras and Eve do, and I don't want anyone from class 2-C to find out who I really am. I can misdirect them with my acting, but once they see my true face there'll be nothing I can do to throw them off.

"Might I ask a question about your true identity?" she asked.

"I cannot promise I can give you an honest answer."

"Are you—human?"

“I see. You think that because I’m hiding my face, I’m of the demi-human races?”

“No, that’s not it. It’s just…Lady Seras is a high elf, you know?”

“…?”

I had no idea what she was getting at. The knight sighed and continued.

“It’s difficult for humans and high elves to have children together, no? If you are a human—it’s going to be tough. That’s all,” she said. Which was pretty personal for unsolicited advice, I thought. She shrugged. “At least you don’t seem like a bad guy.”

“Hmm, how can you tell after such a short time?”

Makia turned her head away. “You’ve been slowing down for me.”

Well if I didn’t, she’d have had to do a little jogging to catch up with me because her legs are so short.

She pouted for a moment, then looked up at me. “I have to thank you. I never thought I would get to see Miss Seras again.”

“You seem to really look up to her.”

“She’s an idol to all of us holy knights. She’s strong, beautiful, elegant, kind... But I feel there’s something different about her now.”

“How so?”

“I think she’s gotten used to letting her emotions come to the surface. She used to be much more stoic. Less expressive. I think that’s why she seemed to be some kind of divine presence back when we first met.” Makia stopped walking and looked down at her shoes. “Look after her for us, okay?”

“I have no intention of ever treating her wrong. She’s important to me.”

“That’s good to hear.” Makia calmly swept the hair from her face. The other two holy knights had departed, but Makia stayed with me as if she’d been ordered to watch over me.

“You’re back.” Eve walked toward me with Slei in tow. We were some way away from the tent. “How is Asteria?”

“With Princess Cattlea, enjoying a little time together before saying their goodbyes.”

“Hmph...I see. Why are you walking around with a child?”

Makia furrowed her brow, and her temples began to tremble. “I am the current Captain of the Holy Knights of Neah, Makia

Renaufia...!"

"Hmph, my apologies," said Eve. "You're a very capable child, then."

"How rude! I am older than Lady Seras, I will have you know!"

"My *deepest* apologies then. My name is Astorva, the Second of the sworn swords of Belzegea."

Eve looked at me for approval, and I nodded in response. Astorva was Eve's pseudonym—another name borrowed from the Lord of the Flies legend.

"You have some reason for hiding your identity, along with this *master* of yours? Next you'll be telling me that you're Eve Speed, disappeared into the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters…or some other nonsense like that, eh?"

"What?!" Eve's distress by this unlikely guess was noticeable.

We can't try to play that off as natural with the way she just took it. Makia looks like she realizes she just hit the nail on the head too.

"Astorva."

"Wh-what is it, my master?"

"Why don't you take off your mask and show her your face?"

"Eh? Oh…"

Eve understood my logic. She was in her human form, so it was better to reveal that than be under a cloud of suspicion. We could show Makia that Eve wasn't a leopardman and reveal her "true face."

Eve took off her mask.

"Can hardly call you Eve Speed now, can I?" said Makia, sighing as she watched Eve swish her thick twintails back and forth. The suspicion drained from her voice. "I'd love to have a famous warrior like Eve Speed on my side though, really I would."

Eve for her part closed her eyes, and happily smiled at us both.

"Ahh... It really does feel good to get that thing off. Huh? What's everyone looking at?" Some of the soldiers bustling through camp had stopped to look at Eve, and she was scanning their faces in confusion. "Wh-what is it?"

They'd all fallen for her. I guessed at first that they were just interested in seeing what was under the mask, but now they'd seen her real face, they were interested in her for a whole different reason.

"Master, do I have something on my face?"

"You're a rare breed, you might say," I told her.

“Hmph, I don’t follow.” Eve turned her head to the side like a child.

“Right now, that’s probably for the best.”

“Hmph…okay.”

Well, that seems good enough for her.

“And so... My master, what should we do ne—”

“Captain Makia!” A soldier rushed over to her side and glanced at Eve and me.

“What is it?”

“There has been a request from Lady Ayaka Sogou. She wishes to meet with Sir Belzegea.”

Sogou, huh... What should I do? After she cut down that Inner Circle demon, she said she wanted to thank me again later. I suppose I did say I’d meet her again, but I didn’t think she heard me. Should I meet with her?

It’d be more suspicious to refuse.

She isn’t being aggressive…only grateful to someone who saved her when her life was in danger. Besides, the heroes of 2-C might become a problem for me in the future, and this is a good opportunity to get an idea of what I’ll be up against. This might be the perfect chance to meet with her.

Unless...

“The whole group of those amazingly powerful heroes are coming over just to meet me?” I asked.

“Ah—no, I believe Ayaka Sogou herself is the only S-class hero present. The others are B-class and below, if I recall correctly,” replied the soldier.

I see. That puts what Zweigseed said during the battle in perspective. He said that Sogou was the only obstacle to their victory. If it’s just Sogou, I think I’ll be able to throw her off my scent with my acting. Kashima—well, if she does happen to be here, I think that’d be fine too. Hijiri would be much more difficult to fool.

But the others are all B-class and under? I understand the Takao Sisters work as a team, so if Hijiri is gone, then Itsuki is gone too. But Oyamada and Yasu aren’t here either?

In the space of a few seconds, I made my choice.

“Understood. I will meet with her—please lead the way. Unless you have any objections, Captain?” I asked.

“None at all. I’ll be accompanying you too, of course.”

“Naturally. In that case, I accept.” I beckoned Eve to follow.

“Hmph. Me too? Alright, then.”

Eve encountered the Takao Sisters in the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters, but if they weren’t present there was no risk of her identity slipping out. I leaned in close to Eve, bringing the mouth of my mask to her ear.

“Don’t talk unless you really have to,” I whispered. After a moment’s confusion, Eve seemed to understand and nodded.

The Takao Sisters might be gone, but Kashima might be here. She’d met Eve in the forest. Eve’s voice and appearance is different right now, but I want to avoid any chance that Kashima might pick up on something that could give away the game. The only other concern would be Ikusaba Asagi.

When we entered Sogou’s camp, that concern was quickly swept away. There was no sign of Ikusaba or Kashima. Some of the assembled heroes had been Kirihara’s hangers-on, others I recognized from other cliques and friend groups. There was a slight fear visible on some of my classmates’ faces, likely due to the unsettling appearance of my Lord of the Flies mask and outfit.

Guess I should’ve expected this reaction—unlike the locals they haven’t heard the legends, and aren’t used to seeing people dressed up like the Lord of the Flies.

“Ah.” Sogou noticed me, and made to speak, but seemed to trip on the words.

She must’ve wanted to call me by name.

I stopped and bowed deeply.

“My name is Belzegea. Former Ashint member, present Captain of the Lord of the Flies Brigade. It is a great honor to meet the Heroes From Another World who have come to save our own world.”

“N-not at all. In the battle, it was you who saved us!” Sogou seemed sincerely grateful, but somewhat embarrassed. She had a crutch under one arm, but didn’t appear to have any visible injuries. A sprained ankle or something? “Ahem, allow me to introduce myself once more. My name is Sogou Aya... No, Ayaka Sogou. Thank you so much for saving us from danger in the battle today.”

Polite as always—that’s just like her.

“There’s no need for thanks. I gather you did more than your fair share of fighting. Tell me, those silver weapons that can expand and contract—are they magical weapons, perhaps? I’m fascinated by them.”

“Ah, no. That was my unique skill. As a hero, I…” Perhaps because I expressed an interest, Sogou went on to explain what she knew about her unique skill carefully and in detail. I nodded as she spoke, and exclaimed in wonder from time to time.

“Hmm. These unique skills are quite the amazing powers to behold!”

All right, now I’ve got a good idea of what Sogou’s unique skill does.

“I’m sure the highest level heroes have the most amazing unique skills of all... Hmm, it’s all so fascinating...” I feigned curiosity. “Tell me Lady Ayaka, what sort of miraculous skills do the other heroes possess?”

Coming from the man who had just saved her life, it wasn’t a suspicious question at all.

“Ahem, well I can only tell you of those I know…”

Perfect.

Sogou talked about the unique skills of all the highest class heroes, discussing Kirihara Takuto first. Unfortunately, she didn’t know much about either of the Takao sisters’ skills. Then she moved on to the A-class heroes—Oyamada Shougo, Yasu Tomohiro and Takao Itsuki.

When she discussed Oyamada and Yasu’s respective abilities, Sogou’s expression clouded. She went on to explain their absence. “—And so the two of them were separated from the class… At present we are unaware where either of them are. I’m sure there are search groups from each of the armies out looking for them.”

Not just that you don’t know where they are—it’s unclear whether they’re even alive or dead.

“I pray that they are both alive and safe,” I said with a nod, trying to sound sincere. “But now I see—the power of your heroes must work quite differently from the magic and incantations that exist in our world. Quite different from my own cursed-magic, as well. This has been very insightful, thank you so much, Lady Ayaka.”

“N-not at all! My apologies for repeating myself…but you saved us today. It’s all thanks to you that…” She turned to look at the students assembled behind her.
“…That everyone standing here is alive and well.”

Kirihara and the Takao Sisters are off on the eastern front…and most of the students here are male. Does that mean that Ikusaba Asagi, Kashima, and all the other girls are fighting in the west? That’s assuming that everyone else was assigned here to the southern front.

The rest of the class crowded around to praise the Lord of the Flies Brigade.

"Thank you so much! You saved our lives!"

"That cursed-magic stuff is amazing!"

"If you hadn't come, we'd totally all be dead by now!"

"Wh-who is that beautiful girl beside you? Is that Seras Ashrain?"

Each and every one of them were looking nice and fresh-faced now. What happened to the weak-willed kids who did nothing when I was disposed of by that foul Goddess? Minamino Moe was standing tall—changed in her own ways, I supposed, but that wasn't what caught my attention.

There I was, looking at the ones who'd stared down at me with evil grins on their faces as I was sent away. The ones who triumphantly glared at me, goaded on by that Goddess' jeers. Where were those faces now?

They're all just like leaves floating in a river, going wherever the current takes them. They don't think to make currents of their own, and they never fight against the flow—they just let their emotions and senses get carried off wherever the river takes them. They probably aren't even aware of it…don't even see the river as a bad thing.

That foul Goddess egged them on, and they cheered. And then they'd just been thrown into battle, with death closing in, and overcome it. And they just accepted this like it was a completely natural state of affairs.

They were mentally pliable—if I made a stronger current, I might be able to work with some of them. The problem was the ones who didn't go with the flow, the ones who made their own way.

First among them was that foul Goddess herself, then Kirihara Takuto and Ikusaba Asagi. Takao Hijiri would make her own path, but only if she thought the others were wrong. Not to mention...

I looked at Sogou Ayaka through the slits in my mask.

Our friendly class rep. She didn't look like the type to use trickery and deception to forge her own path. She was more likely to be plain, honest, and firm with everything she did and end up changing the current, whether she intended to or not. She'd also end up attracting others like her, who weren't so easily swayed.

Thinking about it that way... Sogou and Kirihara might be polar opposites at their cores, even if they both attracted followers. It was sometimes tough to tell whether Kirihara was actively trying to be

manipulative or not, though.

In any case…

That foul Goddess.

Kirihara Takuto.

Ikusaba Asagi.

Takao Hijiri.

If I can either take them out, turn them to my side, or otherwise neutralize them…the others should fall into place.

"Belzegea-san, I've decided," Sogou made her way toward me, leaning on her crutch. Her eyes were perfectly clear, without a hint of cloudiness. "I'm going to become stronger than anybody else."

"Hmm?"

"If I get stronger, I'll be able to protect everyone. I saw that clearly in the battle today. I won't let anyone else die," she said with conviction in her voice, almost as if she was speaking to herself. "I know not everyone in my class likes me, and there are some that speak harshly against the things I do. But I'm going to protect my classmates with all my strength. Each and every one of them."

"What a wonderful attitude to have," I said.

Sogou looked down at her feet.

"That's why I-I'm going to become stronger. Stronger, stronger... The strongest that I can be." She clenched her fists tight. "There are some things you can't protect with just words—so many things you need real strength to defend. I learned that in the battle today. I saw more than enough proof out there in the field than I care to admit."

Sogou bit her lip, and continued in a voice almost too soft to hear. "And back then... When Mimori-kun was disposed of, if only I had been stronger, then things wouldn't have ended up that way. If I… If I had been stronger than the Goddess then… If I only had power."

"You mentioned just now that some of the other heroes oppose you?"

Sogou had been lost in thought, and gave a start at my question.

I pressed on, "Would you protect even those who refused your protection?"

"Yes," she answered without hesitation. Sogou looked around at the camp, scanning the horizon. "There is a man named Banewolf-san, we are currently searching for him."

She looked down at the crutch which supported her, silent for a few moments before looking back up at the castle. “If my body would only obey my commands, I would be out searching for him too. He… Bane-san protected us, even when it meant risking his own life. He had not known us for long, and there were some who rejected his help, but he protected us all the same. He has always cared for us. He risked his life to let soldiers from the south wall escape. No, it wasn’t just Bane-san. It was Agit-san, and the others too… The powerful should protect the weak, I think I learned that from them.”

Sogou smiled a little. “Though I don’t think Kirihara-kun, Oyamada-kun, or Yasu-kun would agree…”

“Even then, you—” I started, but she wasn’t done.

“If there’s someone out there that wants to do harm to the people I’ve decided to protect…then I will stand in their way, with all my strength. No matter what. I won’t let anybody else die.” Sogou turned to look at her classmates. “I…I’m going to become strong. The strongest person alive.”

Class rep…what am I going to do with you.

A soldier rushed over to the other 2-C heroes, and after giving them a short message, Minamino Moe quickly came running over to us both.

“Ayaka-chan! He said they’ve found Bane-san!”

“…Eh?!”

There were tears in Minamino’s eyes. “He’s alive!”

“A-are you sure...?” asked Ayaka.

The other heroes gasped in amazement.

“I’m sorry, Belzegea-san… I…”

I had almost all the information I needed.

“It seems you’ve received some good news. Please, don’t let us delay you.”

“Yes, thank you. Thank you so much for saving us today. Until we meet again.”

“…Yes. Should we ever have the chance.”

Sogou Ayaka. She only follows her own pure selflessness. I don’t know which way she’ll fall yet. She might be the closest of us all to everyone’s ideal of a “hero.” At the same time, that also makes her a wild card—in some ways the most difficult to read.

She needs that crutch because of the toll that her Kisou-style

kyokugen techinque takes on her body. She's going to recover then, sooner or later.

I watched Sogou as her classmates helped her walk away. She could be the toughest person I'd have to deal with...



I turned away.

"Let's go, Asteria."

Eve followed as we walked, and I began to ponder the future.

The key would be how long the Demon Empire can hold out. While the Heroes were off fighting, the Goddess had fewer pawns at her disposal. If I'm right that the Demon Empire were coming to attack that foul Goddess... Knowing her, it was more than possible she'd send them off to battle while she stayed in Alion to keep out of harm's way.

The Demon King had appeared in the east too. What was it that Zweigseed said before he died…? Something about Einglanz being strategically important to their army. He might've been an important pawn of the Demon King.

Would the Demon Empire retreat once they learned what happened here on the southern front? If the Demon King were to retreat back north after learning of Einglanz' death, that would be the best outcome for me. But if Kirihara and the others on the eastern front ended up defeating him, that made matters much more complicated.

If Kirihara or one of the others were to get injured so badly that they couldn't fight anymore, and then if the Demon King chose to hide up in his northern empire, the rest of the S-class heroes would have no choice but to go after him. That would temporarily take everyone from 2-C—my biggest obstacle to crushing the Goddess—out of the picture.

The S-class heroes would need to head north, at the very least. While they were gone, I needed to learn how to use this forbidden magic, and crush that foul Goddess.

I guess now it's a race against time... Will the Demon King die first, or the Goddess?

If I could complete my revenge while the S-class heroes were away, I wouldn't have to worry about Sogou Ayaka anymore. Moving forward, I was going to need some more information about the S-class heroes' movements. I could think of one way of getting some of that information regularly, but if Sogou Ayaka was going to stand in my way in the future, what would happen if I revealed my identity to her?

She just declared that she would protect her fellow classmates no matter what. But what if the person who attacked them happened to be another member of 2-C? Caught in the middle—she would be contradicting herself no matter how she responded. The one standing in her way as an enemy would be one of the very classmates she

swore she'd protect.

What would Sogou Ayaka do, if Mimori Touka, the one she thought was dead, appeared before her?

It would create an opening—she'd let her guard down. And if I had to take out another class member, I did have a way to use my unique skills to neutralize Sogou without hurting her. I could use my status effect skills for that.

Sogou went against the Goddess when she disposed of me. If I were to hurt her to achieve my goals, I'd be no better than the people who laughed when Vicius cast me down.

"What's wrong?" Makia asked suddenly.

"Oh… The hero from another world, she looked to be a child of tender years, but there's a fine soldier inside that one. I'm a touch impressed," I replied.

"Hmm, in awe of her then, eh?"

"Yes."

A soldier came for Makia, and she turned back to me after he left.

"Head back to the tent whenever you feel like it. Something's come up that I have to take care of."

"Don't you need to keep an eye on me?" I asked.

"I don't believe it's necessary anymore." She shrugged her small shoulders at me and left.

I didn't sense anyone else nearby.

"You can talk now," I said to Eve, dropping all formality.

"Hmph."

"Sorry for just making you stand there in silence."

"Doesn't bother me… I just sort of feel like dead weight right now," she said.

"No, you've been doing good work here in camp."

"Really?"

Several people—especially the male soldiers—had been looking at Eve the whole time we'd been walking along. A beautiful girl like her was perfect for distracting the opposite sex. If they're looking at her, they're ignoring me.

I explained this to Eve, and she grunted lightly in response.

"It feels strange to be looked at like that by humans," she said.

“Just another tool you can use to your advantage, that’s all.”

MEANWHILE, ELSEWHERE…

HALF THE TROOPS which were intended for the southern front were on standby at the Magnar capital of Shinad when news of the enemy’s rapid southern advance came. But the Demon King’s army was fast—too fast.

When the enemy arrived there was no time to wait for reinforcements. The White Wolf King and his forces rode out to confront them in battle. It was not long before they retreated in face of a likely defeat.

Several hours later the castle gate was breached, and the Demon King’s forces fell upon them like an avalanche. The whole city was transformed into a fierce battlefield, until the Wildly Beautiful Emperor and his Band of the Sun from the Empire of Mira joined the fray. Luckily there were no further Inner Circle demons on the southern front. Though casualties were heavy, the Sacred Alliance won the day.

But Shinad, the capital of the Kingdom of Magnar, was greatly damaged. To add insult to injury, the White Wolf King was lost in the fighting. Search parties all came back empty-handed, and his whereabouts remained unknown.

On the western front the enemy’s forces pushed Yonato’s Holy Order of the Purge from northern Magnar all the way back to the northern border of their own territory. When Yontao’s advance seemed to be succeeding, the enemy deployed their Inner Circle demons onto the battlefield and the tide was turned in an instant.

The Demon King’s army continued to push forward, seeking to destroy the Holy Eye which they had been targeting for so long. Led by the Inner Circle demon Dreykuvah, their forces finally reached the capital of Yonato. Yonato prepared to deploy their ancient weapon, the Holy Cavalry, along with a group of heroes from another world led by Ikusaba Asagi. Yonatoan forces launched a desperate counterattack.

With the Demon King’s armies invading, the whole continent bled with fierce resistance. But nowhere was quite as terrible as the Western Front.

KASHIMA KOBATO

THE CAPITAL CITY OF YONATO lay in ruins.

"Curia..."

As Curia Guilstein, Holy Priest of Yonato, was carried away on a stretcher, the queen rushed to her side.

The canvas that supported her was dyed a vivid red, dripping and splattering against the stone floor below. The Queen of Yonato was pale, and she looked down at Curia with a pained expression. The Holy Priest's beautiful silver hair was splayed out and hanging off the edges of her stretcher, half soaked in deep red blood. The queen wrapped her hands around Curia's.

"Oh, Curia... What have they done to you?"

There was a thick puddle of blood where the Holy Priest lay before she was placed onto the stretcher. One look at her was enough to know her friend was barely holding on.

Curia's face had mercifully been spared, but her body was in a terrible state. It was a miracle she hadn't been completely torn to pieces—strange even that she could still breathe in her current state.

"Lucky we've got some healing spells on our side then, eh?" said Ikusaba Asagi. She was standing some distance away from them both, watching as the queen despaired. Asagi motioned to a few of the members of her group. "Want me to send a few of them with you? The skills we heroes got seem way better than the magic of this world, yeah?"

The queen raised her head painfully slowly—the color was drained from her face. The expression she wore was a complex mix of emotions, but in a few seconds it passed, and she turned to Asagi.

"Please help her."

"Sure thing." The three girls who Asagi had motioned toward jumped to attention. "Sorry to call on you right after the battle, but you three gotta get to work."

"R-right!"

"Th-then let's go."

"O-okay."

They rushed over to the stretcher, and the queen began to talk with them in a feeble voice. Soon the Holy Priest was carried away with the queen and Asagi's three healers not far behind.

Asagi put her hands behind her head and looked on calmly. Behind her lay what appeared to be a fantasy-style cavalry robot, half-

destroyed and propped up against the ruined wall of the building. This was the fabled “Holy Cavalry”. There were pieces of rubble, castle wall and brick lying strewn all around them. Tangled up on top of the ruined Holy Cavalry lay a huge monster with a lance driven through its mouth and piercing its skull.

Dreykuvah, Kobato recalled. *A demon of the Inner Circle…*

Asagi turned back and looked up at the demon’s corpse with a cat-like smile. “Hrrm, lucky we got here in time to finish that thing off! This Inner Circle guy or whatever does look like he was super strong, y’know. …Course, it’s only right that I got the finishing blow! Isn’t that just, like, how it always should go down? Bosses always got the most EXP in ’em, right?”

The Holy Priest had battled with Dreyvuvah until both were practically at death’s door… But when the demon had breathed its last, it was Ikusaba Asagi who landed the final blow.

Kashima Kobato stood beside her, turned away from the broken robot and the great demon corpse with its tongue lolling out. Instead she looked in the direction of the stretcher, which had now disappeared into another room.

“I wonder if Curia-san will be okay…” said Kobato.

“H-hey hey, ’course she isn’t gonna be okay. I mean just *look* at her. Now you’re making me wonder if *you’re* okay, Kobato-chan!”

“…Asagi-san.”

“Sup?”

Kobato looked back at the corpse behind her—it was so large she could scarcely believe her eyes. But she was already becoming strangely numb to the sight, perhaps because of how unreal the whole scene was.

“This Inner Circle demon… Was your strategy really the only way we could’ve beaten it?”

“Huh?”

“Um, I mean… The Holy Priest was prepared to die to defeat him, just as you asked, but was there really no other way? I just wonder…”

Asagi’s lips curled into an ironic smile as she looked in the direction the Holy Priest and her queen had gone.

“The queen looked like she wanted to say something, yeah… Probably somethin’ about how our reckless plans got her precious little Curia all messed up like that, right?”

Kobato was thinking the exact same.

Asagi continued, “But like…in the end the Holy Eye’s safe and sound now, yeah? This country hasn’t been destroyed or taken over by the monsters either, right? Sacrifice a few to save the many. Yeah, we’re totally okay on balance, I figure. That’s what I think, anyway.”

“That might be true….”

“Huh? What, you trying to beat me over the head with logic? Hmp-hmph, you had a better idea then did you, Pidgey-chan?”

“…No, I didn’t. I couldn’t think of anything.”

“*Ha ha ha*, soz soz. That was mean right? But it’s all *A-okay*. I hate people who ask for your own ideas as soon as you start complaining.”

Asagi was looking straight ahead, at some of the girls from their group tending to the injured soldiers. They were working quickly with the locals of Yonato—all on Asagi’s orders. She called out to them.

“Hey, everyone—luckily, almost all of us heroes got through this without a scratch… I get that you’re all tired, but let’s show them we’re really putting our backs into it, eh? Wouldn’t want anyone thinking badly of us now, would we? Like, sorry, guys, but this is how it is! Just a little more, then we can rest, ’kay?”

She finished her announcement and turned back to Kobato.

“But listen, Pidgey-chan…like, I was really lost for a while, y’know? We’re in this whole other world, yeah? It’s been tough, yeah? I, like, didn’t know what I should do here…what I wanted to do, I mean.” She smiled and looked down to the floor, lightly kicking the rubble at her feet. “My main goal is to make sure everyone in our group survives. Second is to get ’em all home safe, to the old world. Those are, like, my only two goals for nowsies.”

It does worry me that she’s limited that to only our group...

“So you think we should all defeat the Demon King together then, Asagi-san?” asked Kobato, expecting her to answer right away.

Asagi just stood there though, looking at her with an expression that was difficult to read.

“Dunno,” she finally answered.

“Eh?”

“Like, just for example…” She began to play with her hair, twirling it around her fingers. “What if, like, the Goddess isn’t the only one who can send us back—what if the Demon King has the same power? Then, like, if it’s *totally* obvious the Demon King is gonna win,

and he invites us over to his side…

"I mean, this is just an example, yeah? Hypothetical, okay?" she clarified before continuing. " But if it looks more likely that he can send us home than the Goddess, I figure I can accomplish my goals better if I'm on his side, y'know."

"Eh… But then…"

"Of course, like, if the Goddess wins and we can all go home that way, that'd be best. It's just like…you always wanna bet on the winning horse, yeah? Well, I guess you're thinkin' about her…" Asagi crouched down, picked up a small piece of rock, then started throwing it up in the air and catching it in her hand. "I know you love Sogou-chan, but she'd never let us go over to the Demon King's side, right? But also like…"

She threw the rock against one of the ruined walls of the building. It made a harsh, dry cracking sound, then rolled to the floor.

"To survive in this world," she said, "You've gotta be able to sniff out the winners from the losers, dontcha?" She rounded out her statement with a growl.

Is she for real? Kobato felt more uneasy around Asagi than she ever had before.

"But, like, hey…you saw the look on the queen's face earlier? Like, it was *totally* me that suggested Curia sacrifice herself. But doesn't that also make me the one who came up with the plan that saved this whole country? Man, being in charge is so complicated… Did you know that, Kobato-chan? But it's cool, right?"

"I… I don't really know."

"Going with the easy answer, huh? Completely kills the conversation, though." Asagi slowly brushed off her hands. "Whatevs. I've gotta give it a bit of effort too, eh. Got that new skill, might as well use it—'specially Queen Bee plus Pain Block's gonna come in real handy with all these injuries around."

Asagi's unique skill had developed, advancing to a whole new level in the heat of battle. She was a B-class, supposedly inferior to the S and A-classes above her, but she had a unique skill of her own.

"Like, I know we've all got these ranks with letters of the alphabet on 'em, but I get the feeling there are hidden ranks too, y'know?" Asagi had said. *"Like, maybe there are ranks even within the S-class? The normal ones are 'Super', but some of them are 'Special' or something. I'm a B-class, but like maybe I've got a special secret rank, somethin' that starts with a 'B' maybe? 'Best,' right? Just kiddin', lol!"*

No—she might just have been right, thought Kobato. She felt something strangely convincing about that explanation. Were there hidden ranks for the C-class and D-class heroes too? *If that's so then… maybe I could be of use to Sogou-san.*

She couldn't help but daydream about the possibility.

"C'mon, Pidgey-chan, let's go. We weren't much use in the fight so we've gotta make up for it now eh?"

Kobato jogged to catch up with her, and Asagi yawned lazily as they walked away together.

"Man, I'm sleepy… Hey, I think this new upgrade to my unique skill, like, lets me do debuffs, y'know?"

"Debuffs?"Kobato didn't understand the word—according to Asagi, it was a term used in a lot of recent games.

"The Queen Bee plus Strengthen I've been using all this time has been a buff skill, one that powers people up, yeah? Debuffs just, like, do the opposite."

"So they power people down?"

"Yeah, that's the idea," Asagi bent down as she walked, picking up little stones from the ground.

"So, like, in some games buffs and debuffs are basically useless. But there are some where they're super important. I guess status effect skills are the same, huh? Sometimes you're wondering why they're even in the game, but then in some games, they're so strong they can, like, basically negate a target's good stats."

Kobato didn't play games and didn't really understand. *Status effect skills*… A thought popped into her head. *Mimori-kun!* She looked down at the ground as Asagi kept talking.

"So attack skills aren't the only thing that matters. I think, like, the reason we beat that big Inner Circle demon that was sprayin' out all that Demon King essence was 'cause of my buffs and debuffs, y'know? I s'pose that essence stuff is kind of a debuff too, huh." She quickly sent one of the small stones in her hand flying. It stuck perfectly in a crack of the a nearby ruined wall, like a tennis ball jammed into a wire fence. "So, like, what I'm saying is, like... Long as you can get the right buffs and debuffs on everyone…" She nodded to herself. "Ain't no skill in the world more powerful."

MIMORI TOUKA

THE TENT WAS BUSTLING when we returned. Seras was standing outside with the princess, surrounded by members of the Holy Knights of Neah. From the smiles on their faces, I could see that they had said their goodbyes. Seras noticed us as soon as we returned, but I motioned for her to keep talking with them and she returned to the other holy knights.

"Hmph, Seras is still idolized by her subordinates, I see," grunted Eve.

"I imagine a big part of that is due to Princess Cattlea," I noted.

Seras fled her country just before it was invaded. Her actions didn't speak well of her, but the princess must've influenced their opinions. I couldn't imagine they would welcome her back so warmly otherwise.

Of course, Seras also rushed to her princess' defense, bringing us along with her.

"I specifically asked Seras to act independently, exactly for times such as these," the princess might have said. That could convince the other holy knights that Cattlea was thinking of the future when she allowed Seras to leave. It would have to. No matter what her intentions at the time, Seras' escape brought her here, after all. This is the result of everything that's happened.

"Whatever Cattlea said on behalf of Seras, it worked."

"She's the Seras Ashrain she is today because of her, eh?" said Eve, looking at me sideways and stroking her jaw.

"What are you saying?" I asked.

"The Seras Ashrain that's still to come…that's going to depend on *you*."

I snorted. "Seems that way, yeah."

At about the same time the group had finished their goodbyes, a well-dressed knight of Neah approached the tent.

"Princess Cattlea, Baron Pollary is on his way, bringing an Alionese general with him. What would you like me to tell him?"

The princess turned her head to the side and checked her pocket watch.

"The military conference isn't scheduled to begin for a while…"

"Ah, well," the knight turned to glance at Seras. "I believe he would like to meet with Captain Seras."

The princess narrowed her eyes and smiled a little.

“I see. Baron Pollary does have quite the attachment to that *relic* of Seras’, doesn’t he. Well. The one you must ask for permission is not me, but her current master instead.” She looked directly at me, and the holy knights turned in unison to do the same.

Man, I’m lucky I have this mask to hide my facial expressions—takes away the strain of keeping up a poker face all the time.

I stepped forward.

“Baron Pollary is Alionese nobility, is he not? Would there be any advantage to the Holy Empire of Neah if we were to have Seras to meet with him?”

For a moment the princess looked somewhat taken aback, but she quickly regained her smile. “You are correct... Baron Pollary is heir to a famous house in his own country of Alion. I believe it would put us in good standing if we were to give him a favorable impression of Neah. That is my opinion, at least.”

I nodded in reply.

“Then let’s accept, on the condition that you are allowed to accompany Seras to this meeting,” I said. “And only if Seras herself is willing to meet with him, of course.”

Seras placed her hand over her chest and nodded in understanding. “Anything I can do to be of use to my princess…with permission from my master.”

Seras and the other holy knights immediately set out to prepare for the meeting. Eve and I began to walk away, but the princess rode up to us, already mounted for travel across the camp.

“Thank you for being so considerate,” she said.

“I heard the results of the battle today will determine whether the Holy Empire of Neah will be restored as a member of the Sacred Alliance. The one who in practice holds the power to make that decision is the leader of the Sacred Alliance, the Goddess herself…who happens to rule over Alion. Perhaps it will be advantageous for you to have powerful friends in that nation. Not to mention…” I looked up at the princess. “I don’t imagine anything untoward is going to happen to Seras so long as you’re by her side.”

“Leave such matters to me. I have warned Seras of the possibility, but I am far more prepared than her for dealing with men of a perverted nature. I will honor the trust you have placed in me, Sir Belzegea.” She turned and looked off into the distance. “And with regards to your request—preparations are complete. Please proceed at your own discretion.”

“Thank you for your help,” I said, bowing lightly.

“It is nothing compared to what you have done for us today. Along with that incident with the Elite Five—we owe you a debt that can never be repaid. And well…” The princess elegantly placed a hand to her mouth. “Had I married Civit Gartland as was arranged, and got the child of the *Strongest Man in the World* inside of me, strong with the blood of his father… Well, I might have thought to turn the child against Bakoss, as a standard-bearer of the resistance.”

She said that like it was nothing to her—this princess is a pretty scary character.

“I’m sure it’s because you were by her side that Seras was able to retain her kind nature and steadfast loyalty,” I said. “I am in awe of your ironclad mental resolve. The loss of your father, the former emperor…not to mention the fall of your country. That strong will of yours has survived it all. You continue to love your country and try the best that you can to protect it. You are truly worthy of inheriting the throne.”

Considering its placement on the borders of Alion, Bakoss, and Ulza—the Holy Empire of Neah would probably be an important tool for me moving forward. There was no harm in trying to win her favor with compliments. And it wasn’t like I was lying, either.

“If I did not think my people were so worthy of saving, I would have abandoned my country and run long ago.”

“You mean to say it’s not just your obligation as a noble? This is personal for you.”

“It was the same with Seras, you know. I would not have saved her from my father or had her escape the clutches of the Bakossi army if I did not believe she deserved saving.”

“I imagine that’s exactly why she chose to save you in return. I know, in fact.”

There was a moment of silence. The princess looked so beautiful, her face lit only by the dancing light of the nearby torches.

I wondered if she was consciously choosing her expressions at every moment? Was this gravity I felt with her what nobility truly meant?

The princess looked back at me, and her eyes softened. “You’re quite the strange individual, Sir Belzegea.”

“The mask tends to have that effect on people.”

“That’s not what I mean. My apologies for saying so, but I cannot picture you as the type of man Seras would take to.” Then her

tone shifted, and became tinged with admiration. “I myself am rather interested in what you look like underneath that *mask* of yours. It’s strange, but even with that thing on, I don’t believe that you are lying to me. How should I put this…? It is as if there are truly are two of you under there.”

Excited voices came from the direction of Seras and the other holy knights as Eve and I turned our backs to the noise and went in another direction instead.

Finally, we came to our destination and I gently moved the curtain out of the way as I stepped inside the enclosed space. Eve followed. Unlike the princess’ tent, our hastily assembled space had no roof, and was open to the clear night sky above.

“Just like I asked,” I noted.

Wide enough to cover the area of effect of the teleportation crystal.

In the center of the space were placed the items I’d asked the holy knights to retrieve for us.

“Right then,” I said. “It’s about time we got back to the princess, but first...”

Eve and I stood side by side, looking down at the broken pieces of the magical war chariot.

“We have to get rid of this thing,” said Eve.

I used Freeze on the debris and one of the larger pieces began to ice over before our eyes. Two sledgehammers lay on the ground by our side, prepared ahead of time for us to pound the frozen chariot to dust. I picked one up and turned to Eve.

“We don’t have much time, let’s make this quick.”

“Hmph.”

With Freeze’s target limit to consider, we had to freeze each piece of debris individually, then crush them one by one.

I didn’t want to leave this chariot here on the battlefield. I wanted to take care of every trace that we were ever there. The magical war chariot could either remain as a physical wreck to be captured and examined, or as a mere rumor spreading amongst the soldiers’ ranks. There was a big difference between those two—the debris could end up being evidence that might be used against us in the future.

“But listen,” said Eve as we worked. “Why don’t we just send the debris back to the witch with that teleportation crystal? Why do we

need to crush it first?"

A good question. Why not just send the ruined chariot as-is? The problem was with the teleportation crystal itself. There might be a limit to the amount of material it could transport at any one time. Erika even said as much herself, I recalled. Erika said that all three of us, along with Piggymaru and Slei, would be able to fit, though—anything more than that, and there were no guarantees.

With that in mind, I wanted to reduce the amount of material we tried to send as much as possible. The first candidate being this magical war chariot…

That's where my Freeze skill came into play—we used the same ability to let us crush up all those Ashint corpses to make them "disappear." With this method, the frozen object was completely erased without a trace. I didn't have to rely on anyone else to do the work for me, and it felt reassuring to get rid of it with my own two hands. Still, doing work like this made me feel like I was trying to commit the perfect crime or something.

It would be terrifying if a serial killer ever got hold of a skill like this.

These thoughts completely absorbed me as I worked on crushing the chariot.

"I think that's about it," I said.

"Hmph. Nobody would ever think all this dust on the ground used to be a chariot," Eve replied.

"Ah, can't forget these, either." I walked over to the corner, where Erika's homemade spears lay. Eve had thrown it at Einglanz during the battle. The knights had been kind enough to retrieve any weapons or objects that we had left behind as well. I inspected the spear, turning it over in my hands.

Looks like once you activate them once, they're used up. Erika did say she didn't design her devices to be used over and over again. We should deal with this stuff the same way we did the chariot.

Once we were done, Eve and I put our sledgehammers outside the enclosure. Everything inside had been reduced to a flour-like dust, scattered in heaps around us. The fabric of the enclosure flapped in the wind, and some of the dust was swept under the curtain walls and carried outside on the breeze.

I brushed a heap away with my foot, sending a cloud of dust through that same gap under the curtain and out into the night air. Only a small pile of it remained now. It too would soon be scattered to

the wind.

"All that's left is for the living proof to disappear—that's us." I took the teleportation crystal from my pocket.

The longer we waited around, the more likely we'd get dragged into some situation I'd rather avoid. We did what we came to do; now it was time to go. All we needed to do was wait for Seras.

"I'm impressed that the Neahan army was able to find all this stuff in the dark," said Eve.

She's right. It would've been hard for us to manage this without their help.

"I guess they're hard workers, aren't they," I replied. *The influence of their former captain shining through, perhaps?*

"I'm glad we saw the battle through," Eve continued, sounding relieved. "None of us were seriously injured either. Although we did break the chariot, I suppose..."

I remembered the discussion I'd had with Erika before we left.

"This chariot—there's no guarantee I can return it to you," I'd said.

"Ridiculous. You're attempting a reckless journey to make it through the northern reaches of the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters. If I wanted the chariot back unharmed, I wouldn't be lending it to you in the first place. Besides, it'd be harder for me to get to sleep if one of you broke apart instead of that chariot. Especially when I think about Liz."

She knew all along that it was never going to return.

I looked over at Eve as I recalled the witch's words. She was down on one knee, her hand patting down the small pile of remaining dust on the ground. She looked lost in thought.

"We might not all have made it through without Erika's help either. I never expected the Forbidden Witch would be such a good person."

A smart one, too. She must've been the ultimate pain in the neck to a certain Goddess of my acquaintance. If she'd used her powers for evil, she might've been able to gather more "believers" than even the Goddess herself. I was glad she was on our side.

A shiver ran down my spine when I thought of Erika and the Goddess working together—I couldn't imagine anything worse.

Eve raised her head. "Hmph, somebody's being sneaky…"

Seras stepped into the enclosure. "I apologize for keeping you waiting."

"You're earlier than I expected," I said.

She smiled, and raised her eyebrows at me. "That is thanks to the princess. She offered me a good opportunity to wrap up the conversation and leave."

"How considerate of her," I said. "How do you feel?"

Seras' wry smile widened.

"They were so welcoming. I was a little surprised, you might say. How should I put it—"

Eve interrupted her. "Rumors of your beauty across the continent are basically legend at this point. I bet they felt like you'd stepped right out of the myths and into reality."

Seras frowned, but her eyes kept smiling. "Surely it cannot be anything as grand as all that."

"How did Baron Pollary react when you met with him?" I asked.

"He brought a great number of his subordinates with him. And it was the first time I had met with him in person, but well…he was *enthusiastic*." Seras chose her words carefully, but it was clear she was hesitating over something. She never broke her smile, but there was a note of concern in her voice. "After I shook his hand, he told me that he'd never wash that hand again, and was quite excited about it.. I had no idea how to respond. According to the princess, the meeting was a great success. However…come to think of it, on her suggestion, I gave him the warhorse I rode in the battle."

I have to hand it to the princess—she really got what she wanted out of the situation. I thought. "Seems like that princess of yours really knows how to make a deal. So are you done talking, then?"

"I had more than enough time alone with her. And I conversed more with the holy knights than I could have hoped for. All we can do now is wish both parties luck as we proceed. I have no regrets left."

"I see."

"Several of the heroes from another world came to see me as well…only the boys though…" She started to trail off, realizing in the midst of speaking that I might not appreciate the topic.

She's being considerate—this must be difficult for her to say. "Don't hold back, you can say it," I encouraged her.

"They seemed like nice people," she said.

Nice people who like to leave other people to do their thinking for them. The Goddess or Sogou…good or evil…it only matters who's leading the pack. If they're egged on by the Goddess they turn into evil incarnate.

With Sogou leading them into battle though, I suppose today they're leaning in the "nice people" direction... They don't even have a firm grasp on who "they" are.

But I'm glad that's the case. If everyone in class was just like Takao Hijiri, I'd have my hands full. With most of them being followers, I only have to focus on the leaders when I'm making my plans.

"Ah… I'm so sorry. What they did to you, I…" Seras said after I was silent for a few moments.

"They were just going with the flow, that's all," I said. "Not to say I think they did nothing wrong—I can't be that forgiving. But there's no need for us to fight them now, especially if it means exposing us to danger."

If I shoot for my classmates and miss, there's the danger I could end up having to face off against Sogou Ayaka. I want to avoid that right now, at the very least. The real problem is the other heroes—the ones that weren't here today. They're the main reason we need to return to the witch's house.

"Let's go home."

As I pondered our plans for the road ahead, I activated the teleportation crystal.

Chapter 2:
A Farewell and a Departure

MY VISION WAS CONSUMED by light.

When the light faded, I was confronted with a familiar scene before me.

It was Erika's house. We stood in the teleportation spot in a corner of one of the rooms. I took off my Lord of the Flies mask and held it in my hands, feeling a strange sense of nostalgia as I looked around.

"We're back."

I checked if everyone was safe.

Seras, Eve, Slei... They're all here.

I looked inside my robes.

"Squee."

Piggymaru was doing fine too.

Eve's ears pricked up.

"I hear footsteps walking away from us—it sounds like a golem."

"First let's check our belongings," I said. We'd cut down on luggage as per Erika's warning. It looked like everything was in order, but I cautioned, "Check if anything got left behind, just in case."

I had requested the princess hide or destroy any items that might remain behind after we left. Luckily it seemed as if everything had come along with us.

"Hmph? Now footsteps are getting closer…" noted Eve, suddenly.

"Onee-chan!" A golem burst into the room, accompanied by Lis wearing an apron.

"—Lis." Eve's voice was low and quiet, but filled with joy.

She must've seen the teleportation spot start to glow with light or something before we arrived, and gone to get a golem on night duty. Come to think of it, a golem would sure come in handy on our journey if we could take it with us.

"I'm glad you're safe, too, Mr. Too-ka and Miss Seras." Lis clenched her small fists, letting the feeling of relief wash over her.

"Yes. We've all returned safely." Seras gave her a smile.

“Pakyuuun!” Slei walked over to Lis and nuzzled her cheek. Lis lightly stroked her head with both hands in return.

“Good work, Slei. You really did your best.”

“Pakyuree ♪.”

“Squee.” Piggymaru burst out of my robes, and bounced toward Lis like a rubber ball. Lis crouched down to stroke the little slime once it had stopped in front of her.

“Good work to you too, Piggymaru.”

“Squee ♪!”

Seras smiled a little as she watched them all, then hesitantly peeked over at me.

“Sir Tooka... Is something the matter?”

Erika still hadn’t shown up yet. I would have thought she’d want to come and greet us as soon as she got news of our arrival.

“Lis,” I said, with concern in my voice. “Is Erika okay?”

“Welcome home,” said the Forbidden Witch when we were reunited. Erika was lying on her side in bed. Lisbeth rushed over to help her sit up to look to us, and Erika thanked her.

...So she can’t even sit up on her own.

“So this is what happens when you speak through your familiars then?” I asked.

Erika’s familiars were placed all over the continent, and she used their eyes and ears to learn what’s happening in the world outside the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters. She could see through their eyes, but she said that speaking through them took a huge toll on her body. I didn’t think it would be this bad, though, and she’d told us that the fatigue lasts for days.

Erika feebly raised her hand. “I knew this would happen when I sent the message, don’t worry about me.” Then her eyes filled with reproach. “That said, if you *were* to take what I’ve done for you for granted, I imagine I’d be very cross with you.”

“Miss Erika Anaorbael,” said Seras, dropping to one knee and bowing her head deeply. “With your assistance, I was able to swing my sword for my princess once more. I will repay this debt no matter what, in whatever manner you see fit.”

“I see.” Erika sighed, almost as if she were still catching her breath, and turned her eyes to me. “I suppose that means you achieved your objective?”

“Yeah,” I affirmed.

“Good. I’d been wondering.” She swept her hair behind her head; the tanned skin on her neck was covered in sweat. “I fainted, you know, after I gave you that message about the White Citadel of Protection. I gave Lis instructions before that happened, so she could care for me.”

Eve, Seras and I turned in unison to look at Lis, who shrank away in embarrassment.

“I helped to do the things her golems weren’t good at… It’s not like I took care of Miss Erika all on my own,” said Lis.

“You were a tremendous help. My golems are suited for rough, simple tasks, but can’t do much when it comes to delicate and detailed work. Their bedside manner is…lacking. You really are a thoughtful child, Lis. That’s why I felt so comfortable fainting! And you’re an excellent cook, I could ask for nothing more.”

“I used to work at a tavern that offered food, and so… I can cook. A little.” Lis smiled modestly.

“It seems like while we were out there on the battlefield, Lis was supporting us here in the background as well.”

“…Mr. Too-ka.”

“You’re a fine member of the Lord of the Flies Brigade.”

“Th-thank you, Mr. Too-ka,” she said, bowing.

Erika wore a deep, musing expression on her face. “You’ve become a fine ‘lord’ yourself, Too-ka.”

“Guess so.”

“There are many things I’d like to ask…” Erika sighed. “But you all look rather tired, so go and rest first. I’m still quite far from full strength myself.”

Once you’re no longer on edge all the time, fatigue can hit suddenly, and hard. I’m sure there’s a neurological reason for that. A switch from the sympathetic to the parasympathetic nervous systems, or something. Anyway, she’s right that we should take some time to rest. But there is just one thing I want to ask first.

Everyone else was already out in the hallway, but I stopped in the doorway, and turned my head to her. “Erika.”

“Hmm?” Erika turned to me from her position lying in bed.

“Something’s come up—a pretty tough obstacle to crushing Vicius that’s standing in the way.” *The heroes of 2-C—Sogou Ayaka in particular.*

“So you’re giving up?”

“Nope, no plans of doing that.”

“I didn’t think you would.”

There was silence, until I chose to speak again. “Erika Anaorbael, there’s something I’d like to ask you.”

Our eyes met.

“That Goddess… Just how much do you hate her?”

“To hell and back,” Erika snorted. “Of course I do. That evil Goddess deprived me of so much potential. I was forced to shut myself away much, much earlier than scheduled as a result. But…there were so many things I had to leave undone on the outside.”

“Vicius is an obstacle, then?”

“To me at least, yes.”

“Erika, you—”

“Look, what do you want, Too-ka?” she interrupted. The dark elf, declared *forbidden* by the Goddess herself, anticipated that I had something to ask of her. “What can I, Erika Anaorbael, assist you with?”

“The details can wait, I just wanted to confirm your feelings first. For now, let’s all get some rest.”

I left Erika’s room, and returned to my own to find Seras in the middle of getting changed.

“Eh! Ah, Sir Too—!”

“Sorry. I’ll come back in a little bit.”

“I-I don’t mind!” came a voice from behind my back.

There’s no way I could go back in there now though. Not from the state of undress I just caught her in, at least.

I touched my fist to my forehead.

…I was thinking about something else, but I should’ve realized.

I decided to leave the bedrooms alone for the time being.

Come to think of it, Eve might be getting changed too. I suppose I need to transform her back into her leopardman form later. …Guess I’ll hang around out here for a while.

I wandered until I came to the room that we usually dined in, and stopped to peek inside. Lis was crouched down in there, her small back facing the door.

I don't think she's sick—it doesn't look that way. More like she's crying. From the way she's rubbing her face, it's like she's wiping away tears, or on the verge of crying.

"I-I'm so happy... Onee-chan... She's home safe..." Ah, they were tears of relief. "Mr. Too-ka, Miss Seras, Piggymaru-chan, Slei-chan... I'm so, so happy they're back."

She tried to stifle her voice as she cried so as not to be found out —not to make anyone worry if they did happen to find her.

She was likely holding back tears when she came to greet us—stopping herself from crying. But on the inside, she must have wanted to explode.

I put my back to the wall and looked up at the ceiling.

Maybe I should go in there now and talk to her. Say some kind words. But if I went in there, it'd just make her feel like a little kid after she's been acting so mature.

I looked again to see that Lis was standing now, and had stopped sobbing as well.

"All right." She clenched her hands into fists, like she was pumping herself up.

She really is a strong kid. Kind too—more than anything.

I left silently, surpressing the sound of my footsteps as I made my way outside the witch's house. I stopped halfway down the stairs which led outside.

"...Ah, that's right. I should talk to Eve—get this out of the way."

We rested up, and the next day Erika demanded we all eat dinner together.

"You should rest a bit longer, shouldn't you?" I asked.

"Nope, I don't wanna," she responded tersely. I was about to argue, but she looked at me with scorn in her eyes and placed her index finger to my lips. "I've been very flexible with your desires, so maybe from time to time you could be a little flexible yourself? You don't mind, do you, Human?"

I gave in, but she still couldn't walk so I had to carry her to the table. *Not to mention she requested I carry her like a princess…* When I asked if I could just lend her my shoulder, she refused.

"A certain someone pushed me too far, and now I feel simply too faint to walk," she replied. I could hardly refuse her when she asked like that.

“Couldn’t a golem do this?” I asked, while she was in my arms.

“Nah, they’re too rough.”

For the first time in quite a while we sat around the table together to eat dinner. It took us a long time to get through our food, because of all the conversation that we mixed in. Mostly we discussed our escape from the northern reaches of the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters, the battle, and everything in between—everything that happened after Erika passed out.

“So you linked the name of the Lord of the Flies Brigade to that band of cursed magic users, and disguised your skills as cursed-magic, you say? Well played,” said Erika, impressed.

She hadn’t yet shown any interest in my talk of the magical war chariot, the army of golems, the teleportation crystal, our use of her handmade weapons, or much anything else.

That was basically the reaction I expected from her though... She really is generous, I think.

As she herself once said: “I live much longer than you humans, you know. Perhaps it’s easier for me to take the long view than it is for you—I can simply take the time to create such items again, and well... This was the right time to use them.”

“Without your help, we surely would have failed,” said Eve, folding her arms.

“Not like I’m expecting payment or anything, but do you mind telling me about some of the magical weapons’ effects later? I have never had the opportunity to see any of them used in battle.”

“If that is what you wish, then allow me. I could talk for hours on the subject of those weapons,” Seras cut in.

“Thanks.”

“Of everyone here, I owe you the greatest debt, Lady Erika—I must do what I can to repay it. Telling you about the weapons is nothing when compared with your assistance.”

“So,” said Erika, getting back on track, “A group of cursed-magic users appear suddenly on the battlefield, turn the tide of the war, and then disappear once the fighting’s done. For better or worse, your whereabouts are going to become quite the topic of conversation.”

“With Princess Cattlea’s assistance, we’ve spread the rumor that we’re heading north.” I added.

“Not a bad idea,” said Erika approvingly. “Even if Vicius doesn’t

believe the rumors, she can't avoid sending some of her forces north to investigate."

"Not sure they'll be worth much, but I do expect she'll send some trackers after us," said Eve in between bites.

"Well, depending on how the battle's progressing in the East and West, she might not even have the men available for that. We can't be sure yet," added Seras.

That's one of the reasons I'm interested in how the other two armies are doing—the southern front too, come to think of it. Half the southern army weren't there at the citadel, they're still in the Magnar capital on standby—I'm not sure what's happened to them yet.

Did they win? Were they defeated?

I'm especially concerned about the eastern front—that's where the Demon King has appeared, and Vicius has gone to fight personally. I think Kirihara went with her, and the Takao Sisters were stationed there, too. If the Demon King is defeated in the east, that would make it difficult for me to make my next move.

"If the Demon King is beaten in the east, the Goddess might come straight for us next, to reveal the identity of our Lord of the Flies Brigade."

"Once I've recovered enough to move my familiars around, I'll set them to gathering information about what's going on across the continent—the eastern front being the first priority. But, well...since it will take me a while longer to recover, that means you'll all have to stay here until then," said Erika.

Right now she's so exhausted she can't gather information. But once she's recovered enough to use her familiars, that information network of hers is going to give us an incredible advantage. The only problem is that we lose access to that information network the moment we leave the witch's house. It costs her too much to deliver emergency messages.

I remembered the way she looked lying there in bed as I bent down to scoop her up. When I saw her face up close, it was hard to ignore how exhausted she looked.

Erika's trying to pass it off like it's nothing right now, but she definitely looks pale—she's pushing herself too hard. Once she passes a verbal message through one of her familiars, she can't properly move the rest of them around for several days.

But right now to properly understand the other heroes' movements, I really want some real-time information. As much as I can get my hands on. We could use messenger pigeons or something similar I suppose, but even

that might take too much time. Especially if I'm asking questions—it'd take several days of round trips to have a conversation.

"Erika, regarding your familiars—there's something I want to talk to you about."

"Hmm?"

"Seras," I called.

She took a scroll of parchment from the bag on her back and spread it out in front of me on the table. Erika leaned in to get a better look.

"What's that?"

When Erika sends verbal messages, it wears her out way too much. But without a way of sending some kind of verbal messages to us, it was going to be difficult for us to stay in contact. So I decided to use a little cheat.

"This thing's called a Ouija board," I explained, "Or it's close enough to one, anyway."

Not an exact copy, just what I borrowed the idea from.

"*Ouija board*? All I see is a piece of paper with rows of letters on it," Eve said.

Erika, on the other hand, understood immediately, just as I'd expected. "Ah—I see."

On the surface of the paper were written letters in alphabetically ordered rows, with "yes" and "no" written at the top. The letters were written in the language of this other world. I was able to read them, but didn't know what order they should be put in on a grid, so I'd had Seras help me with it before dinner.

"You can control your familiars' movements, can't you?"

"Yes."

"So you can use your arms, legs, or whatever to point to different letters on this grid, then?"

"It's possible."

"Meaning you're also able to indicate *yes* or *no* by having them peck at—"

"Of course, I can do that too," she said as she looked over the paper with interest.

It was going to take us longer to receive messages with this method than if she used her voice, but it'd reduce the amount of stress we put on Erika. When we were on the road—before we went to sleep

or when we rested—we could exchange messages with this board.

...I should really have thought of this before we went off to help the princess.

"Your familiars can understand human speech too, can't they?" I asked.

"That's part of what's so great about them, their usefulness is what makes you want to get *familiar* with familiars in the first place. They almost entirely eliminate the need to place oneself in danger."

"So..." I tapped the parchment with my fingertip. "Even if you can only give yes or no answers, there's a lot of information we can gain from them."

Erika nodded in agreement. "It's best to quickly settle matters with a yes or no answer in any case."

Then I'll keep the questions simple. I guess it'll be a bit like when I'm talking to Piggymaru—it can only turn different colors for yes or no. All this is based on the bigger premise that Erika's familiars are going to be able to obtain the information that we need—she's going to be the key. Erika has been able to gather so much information without ever stepping foot outside the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters. I think we can rely on her abilities.

Erika placed a thumb under her delicate jaw, deep in thought.

"You're correct. It will take time, but by using this parchment, we'll be able to talk without any of those exhausting verbal messages. I see… I hadn't thought of this."

"I think it's more that you've never had need of anything like this before, right? You've been living here in hiding, so exchanging information with anyone on the outside would be nothing but risk."

"Hmm, you might be right there."

"Have you ever made the existence of your familiars public?"

"I have not. But even so, I should have thought of this sooner," she said, pouting a little remorsefully. "Well, simple things can end up being pretty huge revelations once someone brings them up, eh?"

I snorted at her in self-deprecation. "It really *wasn't* some big revelation, you know."

"You're too modest, Too-ka."

"It's not modesty, it's just the truth." *Not like I'm the one that invented Ouija boards in the first place.*

I rolled up the parchment. "In any case, I want to use this to exchange messages with you while we're off in the outside world.

And, well—I should probably ask instead of just assuming—are you willing to help us?"

"I will," answered Erika.

"I appreciate it."

"So what information does the Lord of the Flies want me to acquire?"

I explained to her that I needed to know of the other heroes' movements, and my reasons why. *If Erika has time I'd also like to know where the Goddess is, but...*

"Don't go out of your way to get intel on Vicius. I want to avoid anyone catching on that there's someone out there using familiars to track people."

The Goddess might already know about the existence of Erika's familiars—it'd be far worse to raise her suspicions than to spook any of the heroes.

"Then I'll prioritize the Heroes From Another World. And this one—this Sogou is the one I should focus my efforts on the most?"

"Yeah."

"You have a treacherous relationship with this girl, I take it?"

"Nah. You could even say she's friendly. I mean, she's the friendliest one out of everyone in class."

"Hmm, then you're interested in her movements out of concern for her safety?" mused Erika, waiting for my reaction. "…But that's not exactly right either, is it?"

I sighed. "It's complicated."

She's the one I'm on the best terms with—but she's also a completely unknown variable. With that unique skill of hers, and her Kisou style of ancient martial arts. She's an ancient martial arts user and a proper young lady thrown into another world. Even back in the old world, she was special—different from everyone else.

…She has all the makings of a main character—too perfect.

"The other heroes couldn't be reasoned with?"

"Not quite…"

There are two more that almost seem more like they're from a different galaxy.

"There are these two called the Takao Sisters—even in the old world, I could never tell what either of them was thinking. Especially the older sister, she's like an alien."

"—Hijiri?" Eve cut in. "I met her once. You're correct, she's not to be underestimated."

Erika nodded, slowly digesting our impressions of the heroes.

"That Hijiri girl—she's one of the three S-class heroes, no? Should I be focusing my surveillance on Sogou and the elder Takao then?"

"Yeah, your main target should be Sogou, with the Takao Sisters in second. Although…"

"The other S-class concerns you?"

"He's called Kirihara. And he won't be easily convinced to come over to our side, to say the least."

I'd heard from Sogou the different skills that the S-class heroes possessed, but I didn't know who the strongest was. It was possible that Kirihara and Takao Hijiri were growing rapidly in strength during the fighting on the eastern front. Heroes can level up and grow incredibly quickly in battle, and there was always the chance for their skills to change in big ways too. I wasn't the only one evolving.

That made it difficult to know what strategies to develop against them. I needed to get as much up-to-date information on them as possible.

"If you can get information on Kirihara, I'd like that too."

"I'll do what I can. What of the A-class heroes?"

Takao Itsuki, Oyamada Shougo and Yasu Tomohiro.

"Oyamada and Yasu disappeared in the fighting at the White Citadel of Protection—we don't even know if they're still alive, let alone where they are. If you can get any information on their survival —or confirm their deaths—I want that too."

"Mm-hmm. What about the lower ranks?"

"…Just one," I said.

"Kashima?" asked Eve.

"No. A girl named Ikusaba Asagi."

"That one's just a B-Class though, isn't she?" asked Erika.

"Sure… But she's smart, there's no mistaking that. And she's also kind of…kind of…"

"Kind of what?" Eve prompted me.

"…"

"Kind of what, Too-ka?"

…She's kind of like me.

After dinner, it was time to speak with Eve.

"Do you have a minute?" I asked her.

"Hmph, what's up?"

"There's something we need to talk about."

She looked at the others. "Just me, no one else?"

"Just you."

Erika led Lis and the golem from the room, and Seras excused herself to go have a bath. I motioned to the door and Eve nodded, without a single trace of suspicion on her face.

"Understood."

We walked outside together. It was dark; only the fake moonlight from the false sky above lit our way.

"When are we headed back out of here?" asked Eve, once we'd reached the bottom of the wooden staircase.

"I'm thinking about tomorrow. There's no need for us to stay too long."

"Fine by me."

I knew it.

"Eve."



“Hmph?”

“Our journey together…ends here. For now.”

There was a moment’s pause, before Eve reacted with confusion. That made sense. I knew she thought she’d see my journey of revenge through until the end.

“I—” Eve drew herself in closer to me, getting right up in my personal space. “In our fight to save the princess of Neah, did you take issue with my conduct in battle?”

“That’s not it.”

“Then why…?”

“Hey, now.” I sat on a nearby fence. “You remember our original agreement, don’t you? In return for guiding us to the witch’s house, I’d provide the fighting strength to get us here. This was the deal all along.”

“Hmph…” Eve’s face seemed to say she recalled the agreement. It was much easier to read her facial expressions when she was in human form.

“The moment we arrived here our deal was complete. You don’t really have any reason left to help me. You only came north with us because you wanted to repay Seras for her help, didn’t you?”

Eve grunted.

“And with your help, Seras achieved her objective. You fought for me and you fought for her. Whatever debt you owed us is paid. You don’t need to come along any further on this journey of revenge with me.”

Eve’s mouth bent into a slight frown as she stood looking down at me. It seemed as if she were trying to come up with something to say. Finally, she spoke, “But… Erika is going to continue to help you, isn’t she?”

“She *hates* Vicius, that’s why. She can’t do the things that she wants to with that foul Goddess around. That’s why she’s hiding out here in the first place. She has good reason for coming along for the ride.” I looked up at Eve. “But what about you?”

“Hmph…”

“I understand the murder of your parents and fellow members of the Speed Clan isn’t something you can forgive…but did Vicius have anything to do with their deaths?”

Eve stood in silence for a few moments.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I have no idea what those children

were…" *And there it is. Eve has no clear motive for wanting revenge on Vicius.* "But Seras is the same, isn't she?" she asked.

"The reason Seras was forced to be a runaway—that can all be traced back to Vicius. It's because that foul Goddess selfishly wanted to get her hands on her. She has good reasons to hate Vicius, too."

"But Too-ka…I want to help you and—"

"What about Lis?"

Eve was taken aback, almost in shock upon hearing the girl's name. She repeated the words back to me, as if turning them over in her head. Then she understood.

"You're doing this…for Lis," she said.

"Yeah. You wanted to live somewhere with her, didn't matter how modest it was—just the two of you happy together. You said so yourself, didn't you?"

Eve was silent.

"I gave you permission to use that teleportation crystal to bring yourself back here during the battle, even if only to save yourself. That was because we had no clear idea of the enemy's strength, and I couldn't have guaranteed your safety otherwise."

"…Hmph." Eve considered my words for a while.

"Eve."

"...Hmph."

"After I was abandoned by my real parents, I got to live with my foster mother and father. It's only because of all the good memories I have from my time living with them, that I can really say that I was happy then," I continued. "But you don't have all that many good memories with Lis yet, do you?"

That picture Lis has in her head, the peaceful days living with her Onee-chan—barely any of that has been realized yet.

"The village where she was born was destroyed, and she wandered the world. She was pursued by a slave trader and captured…made to work at that awful tavern. After escaping Monroy she came all the way here with us on this treacherous journey. And now someone important to her has finally returned from a battlefield she might have died on."

"…"

"I'm happy you want to help. But you have to think about Lis' feelings now, not mine."

I've got to be clear with her here—I'm sure that Lis would tell Eve it's okay to go, even though she truly wished she wouldn't. I know that's what she's bound to say. If I let things play out then Eve would just accept it, and Lis would, too. Because they're good people, just like my foster parents.

"Let me be direct with you, Eve." I had to say this. I had to be straight—to tell her directly. I looked up at Eve. "Our journey together ends here."

I said it without hesitation, as clearly as I could. Then I saw Eve's shoulders sink.

"…You might be right." The defiance faded from her eyes and was replaced by a look of defeat. "You're right, maybe I wasn't thinking about her feelings."

"She's a good kid—too good, even. She's always suppressing the things she really wants, pushing them down and hiding them so we can't tell what they are. You're slow when it comes to that stuff, too. Of course you wouldn't notice it."

Eve laughed a little at that, then tapped her temple with the heel of her palm as if to check the density of her head. "You're right. I'm slow to notice these things. But when I think of things from Lis' perspective, I think I understand. Those days she spent just waiting for us… If our positions were reversed, I would find it hard, too."

"So… You can live in peace with Lis. Right here. Starting today."

"But Too-ka, even then…"

"What?"

"If you ever need my help, all you have to do is ask. You aren't going to ask me to leave my position as a member of the Lord of the Flies Brigade, are you?"

I opened my eyes a little wider and sighed. "Well—not unless you want to."

Eve nodded, satisfied. "Good. I would've been sad if you'd fired me," she said, stretching out a hand to me.

I grasped her hand in mine.

"I know it's just what everyone always says, but I really do wish you luck on your journey," she told me.

"You've helped us out so much. Thanks for everything."



“I’ve told you before, I’m the one that should be thanking you. If we had never met, I don’t know where I would be right now.”

Our hands began to draw apart, but I grabbed Eve’s hand to stop her from pulling away.

“Wait.”

“Wh-what is it, Too-ka?” She looked taken aback by my gesture.

“If you’re staying, you won’t need this anymore.”

“Hmph…?” Eve nodded instinctively, but then turned her head to the side, not quite sure what I was getting at.

She’s going to live here, in the witch’s house, the depths of the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters. Nobody in the world will ever be able to reach her. There’s no risk of anyone discovering her true identity.

I touched the bracelet on her arm. “You should be the real you.”

After Eve and I left, I went to talk with Seras about my decision.

“I see…so this is where our journey with Eve and Lis is to end.” She sat next to me on the edge of the bed.

She had come straight from the bath, and the blush of warmth remained on her fair skin. She was wearing a cardigan over a cool, light shirt.

“In fact, I had completely forgotten about the arrangement myself.” She gave a wry smile. “It almost felt as if our travels together would last forever. But it’s true that our agreement with Eve was only to come this far.”

She looked down at the floor, placing both hands on her bare white thighs. “I’m sure Lis will prefer things this way as well.”

“Eve can protect Erika if she stays here. Well, the witch has some defensive measures of her own set up, but Eve still might be useful.”

More than all that—nothing good will come of this revenge of mine. Lis and Eve are good people, I can hardly ask them to be involved any further.

“So…what about you?” I asked, looking straight ahead.

“Me? You’re asking whether I intend to remain here or go with you?”

“Yeah.”

“I-I am your knight. Of course I intend to follow you until your journey’s end,” said Seras.

"Right."

I lay back onto the bed with a soft *pomf*, and Seras turned to face me.

"Sir Too-ka…?"

"You've already told me how committed you are," I said, staring up at the ceiling. "I was just confirming that…for the last time. I won't ask you again. It's just..."

Seras put a tightly clenched hand on her chest, and swallowed. A few moments passed before I spoke again.

"I don't like saying anything is for certain… So I won't say that I'm sure I'll be able to protect you. But I will do everything in my power to keep you safe—I promise that," I said.

Seras' fist clenched tighter. "Sir Too-ka…"

"I intend to look after you, until the very end. As long as that's okay with you."

The princess knight was silent for a moment before she answered. "Of course. Of course that's okay with me. N-no question about it. Sir Too-ka, if you are willing to…look after me until the very end, then I could ask for nothing more."

I closed my eyes and smiled at her softly.

"Okay then."

I opened my eyes again.

"I'll have you follow me, by my side all the way until the finish line, Seras Ashrain."

She smiled with her eyes, clear and blue—but I saw that they were moist with tears. Her other hand tightly gripped the blankets on the bed.

"Yes." Her porcelain cheeks were somewhat flushed.
That's not because she just got out of the bath, either.

"I, Seras Ashrain, will accompany you as your knight until the very last. No matter where your path may lead." She moved in closer. "...Even to the ends of the earth."

The false moonlight streamed in from the windows, lightly accenting Seras' beautiful form as if it were granting her some blessing. Suddenly she turned her upper body to me, and brought her elegantly beautiful face right in front of mine.

"I—I have something to tell you."

Sounds like a confession… So she's decided to do it now. I have a

good idea what she's about to say. She said herself that she would talk to me about it someday. That night when I was sleeping and she placed her lips on mine. I thought about telling her I already knew, but I respected her decision to tell me herself. I didn't want to seem insensitive by bringing it up.

Seras swallowed again, not breaking eye contact.

"…Before we arrived here, I gave you first aid—in that cave when you were injured."

"Yeah, I remember."

"You…you were hurt, and exhausted." Seras' legs rubbed against the bedsheets, the gentle brushing sounded like a soft whisper to my ears. I waited for her to continue as she looked to the side, as if unable to bear the feelings of guilt welling up inside her.

"Th-that day… I…"The words stuck in her throat and her concealed guilt caused her to clutch at her chest as she hung her head. "When you were sleeping, I…I placed my lips on yours. Without asking your consent."

For a moment, she couldn't look me in the eyes. Then, steeling herself to whatever my reaction might be, she raised her head to face me.

"I'm so sorry. I had this rush of emotion, and it was wrong of me."

"It's fine," I replied simply. "It doesn't bother me at all."

Seras' shoulders sank despondently. "No, you don't understand. What I did to you, Sir Too-ka…it was a betrayal of your trust."

I get it now. Thinking about it from her perspective, if I were to do something to Seras while she was under the effect of my Sleep skill—that would be a betrayal of her trust. Seras trusts me—that's precisely why she's willing to let me put her to sleep. Under the effect of my sleep skill, she wouldn't wake up—no matter what I did to her. Unless she completely trusted me to put her to sleep, it would be terrifying for her.

Now I can see why Seras feels so guilty about that day. She's serious, and sensitive too. This is just proof that she's a good person. The human trash that I hate so much wouldn't even have guilt for the things they've done.

And I don't want her to feel ashamed…because she's better than them, and she has nothing to be ashamed of.

"You don't need to feel guilty."

"But I—"

“I knew.”

“…Eh?”

I looked from the ceiling over to Seras.

“You can tell that wasn’t a lie, can’t you? And, well, you must know what that means.”

“That day—were you awake?” she asked.

“Maybe so,” I said, staying intentionally vague.

It wasn’t entirely true. I woke up after the fact, and just guessed at what had happened. To Seras though, it’s better if she thinks that I was awake at the time. This way she thinks I knew what was happening and didn’t resist—there’s no need for her to feel guilty about that.

Seras’ eyes scanned the room, as if looking for an answer, then opened wide.

“Eh, Th-Then, ahem…why? All this time, why didn’t you…?” she said, still a little disoriented.

“I was waiting for you to take the next step. Does that make sense to you?”

“Ah, yes…I-I see. You were testing my honesty?”

“How you interpret it is up to you. I’m sure you can easily come up with an answer on your own.”

I saw the guilt inside her melt away.

“Th-then…” She gulped—the sound loud in the almost silent bedroom.

“Then…while it is terribly impertinent of me to ask,” Seras gasped, her breath hot. “The fact that you were awake that day… Might I interpret that as meaning you consented?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

A powerful heat ran through her beautiful white figure. Her usually firm and perfect posture crumpled softly.

“Th-then might I make the request again in a more formal manner?”

This high elf really does have a thing for formalities.

“You mean, for a kiss?”

Seras’ eyes opened wide at the question, but she quickly regained her composure, and formed a more serious expression on her face.

“Yes,” she answered, as if she had been waiting for the question

her whole life.

A laugh slipped out of me.

“S-sir Too-ka?”

“I was always confident that I needed to put on an act so people would like me. I needed to change myself…I had to pretend. To be honest, I never thought anyone would ever come to like the *real* me.” I pushed myself up from the bed. “And…I thought I would worry, when the time came. Worry whether I had any right to all this.”

My foster father helped me fix that—I remembered the words he spoke to me.

“When she first confessed her feelings to me, I actually really hesitated, you know? I mean, she was the most beautiful girl in the academy, everyone said so. Why would she choose me?!

“That’s how I felt at first. I thought we wouldn’t be compatible, or that she was overestimating me somehow. But, how do I put this? I was really struck by how confident she looked when she told me how she felt, and more than anything else I felt I had to meet that courage of hers with courage of my own. I’m so glad now that I had the courage I did then.”

My foster father went on to marry the student who confessed her feelings to him—my foster mother. That’s why, I…

“I’d like to kiss you.”

“Are you sure you’re okay with…me?”

“I like you too, Seras. Is there a problem with that?”

She was still trembling, and her sky blue eyes began furiously darting left and right. In a whisper so quiet it barely registered as sound, she answered: *“No.”*

She moved in closer to me, but I got there first—and placed my lips on hers.

All sound was suddenly gone from the world.

After a long kiss we separated, neither of us the first to pull away. Seras placed a finger to her lips, which had a thin string of saliva stretched out between them. It was as if she was checking something. She sighed to herself in relief, and turned her gaze back to me, her face still hot.

“We really just kissed, didn’t we?”

I sat back up on the bed.

“Think you can get any sleep?”

She sank back into a sitting position, and sat in a silence for a while, her head down. After a time sitting rigidly like that, she shook her head slowly.

Probably can't raise her head because of the embarrassment—easy to tell with elves when their ears turn red like that. I think what Seras wants right now is…more. It's just that…

"Hey, Seras…before we go any further, there's something we have to talk about." She raised her head, and I tried to explain. "Erika said it once, right? That I don't have much interest in girls."

Seras waited quietly for me to continue.

"I really treasure my relationship with my foster parents, but I had real parents too. I hated them…but they both *really* liked each other. It's not like they made me watch them do stuff, but they also didn't care where I was when they did that kind of stuff around the house. Which they did, a lot."

I was purposely vague, but Seras, hugging her right arm to her chest, seemed to understand.

"I see," she said.

"The way they looked…their voices. It's all still stuck in my head," I told her. "I hate them so much. When I think of the things they did to bring themselves joy, I…I find it sickening. That's why when it comes to anything sexual, the first thing that comes to my mind is disgust. I've been unconsciously trying to chase all those thoughts from my mind. I think… I *know* it isn't healthy, like Erika said. But…"

"Sir Too-ka." Seras' eyes were deadly serious, the redness in her cheeks still remained. "Might I not paint over those feelings for you?"

"…Paint over?"

"These images have always been nothing but sickening to you—I might be able to give you something new in their place. I believe there may be value in trying."

"…Paint them over." *I never even considered it.*

"Those feelings your parents forced onto you—I want to erase them for you," she said. "Why don't we start from there? If you don't mind, of course."

"Are you sure?"

"I think I can do it—you said that you liked me, after all." Seras' smiled a little, as if she was holding back tears.

I looked down at the bed and thought for a while. "I think you

can do it, too."

"That makes me glad," said Seras.

"I think if it's with you, I might be able to start to feel differently about all this." I snorted. "…I don't know if it's gonna work though."

"Well, we'll never know if we don't try, will we?"

"Guess not."

Man, she really is…

"You really are something else, Seras Ashrain."

The next day I went to Lis, to tell her that our journey together was at an end. I had considered leaving without telling her, but decided against it.

She was sad at first, but eventually she accepted it. Seras' experience with the princess came to mind.

"We never got the chance to say our goodbyes."

Seras used to carry that unpleasant feeling with her, but now that she's gotten to say her goodbyes it's like a weight has been lifted from her shoulders. That's why I think we need to make time for Lis to say her farewells too.

Well, not like this means we're never going to see each other again though. There'll probably be a chance for us to meet again in the future.

Lis, Eve and Seras were together outside the witch's house. Eve was wearing the same clothes she had been yesterday, but was now back in her leopardman form.

"Squee—!"

"Pukyuuun."

Piggymaru and Slei were both happily playing with Lis too.

They're both so used to being around her now.

"What's with this turn of events? Delaying your departure by a full day…I thought you'd be on your way by now," Erika called to me, as I looked out of the window at the scene outside.

"I wanted to give Lis the time to say a proper goodbye."

Erika came and leaned over beside me, placing her elbows on the window frame. Her bluish-purple eyes watched Lis and the others as they excitedly chatted out in the yard.

"I think you've a soft spot for her, Too-ka."

"We've both been through hell… She reminds me of the way I

was. I know I treat her differently."

"You think by being kind to her, you can indirectly save your past self or something?"

"I guess so, yeah."

"My, my, no excuses?"

"It's the truth." I shrugged. "Maybe not the whole of it, but that is a part of what I'm doing."

"As long as you're being honest with yourself…" Erika straightened up. "But there are other reasons too, aren't there?"

"Eh?"

"Reasons you've delayed leaving here."

Crafty as always, this witch.

"…Some of them are still tired." I leaned against the wall and looked at Seras and the others outside over my shoulder. "I'm happy they're always trying their best… But it seems the Lord of the Flies Brigade members all have this tendency to push themselves too hard. I guess being a leader means I have to know when to tell my people to rest as well as when to fight."

Doesn't matter how exhausted they are—if I tell them to do something, any one of them will do it.

"Especially Slei right now. I want to give her at least another full day's rest. She's the one that worked the hardest in our rescue mission to save the princess, after all."

And she's the one I pushed the hardest.

"I thought about leaving her here with you," I went on. "To be honest, I'm actually still on the fence about it."

I lightly bumped the back of my head against the wall with a *thunk*.

"But when I think about what's to come, having Slei by our side could be the difference between victory and defeat."

"So Slei's irreplaceable, but Eve isn't, eh?"

"Yeah."

Eve's sight and hearing are amazing, and I've relied on her senses, but I can actually do the same things she can—just not as well.

"Just the same with Seras and Piggymaru—Slei's abilities aren't something we can do without."

"Well, I'm sure it'll be fine." Erika made a little *Hup!* noise as she

lightly hopped up to sit on the windowsill. “I know that Slei is close with Lis, but I can see that you and Seras are still her favorites. I think it would be much harder for Slei to part with you two. But, from my observations, Slei isn’t as tired as you think she is. She appears even tougher now than she did when you first set out on your journey through the northern reaches of the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters. There’s something fundamentally different about her. She isn’t like other monsters.”

Slei was only born recently—less than six months have passed since then. She still has room to grow, I suppose? She’s already so powerful now…

“But I don’t intend to push her too hard again if I can help it. This journey is for me—this is *my* revenge. If I’m going to ask her to go past her limits, I’ve gotta try to exceed my own first.”

Erika shrugged. “That’s exactly why everyone ends up wanting to help you, you know. That said, you’re welcome to stay here and rest for as long as you like.”

“I appreciate it. And, well…I think I do want to give Seras and Piggymaru a little more time to rest.”

Slow and steady wins the race. If we’re not so exhausted, it’ll make us more efficient in everything we do. Rest is an important factor in all things.

“When it comes to Seras, I think her nerves were on edge all the way up until she got to meet the princess yesterday.”

It’s not just physical tiredness—she needs a mental break too.

Erika watched from the window as Seras crouched down, and gently held Lis in her arms.

“Hey, Too-ka,” she said after a brief pause, turning to look at me. “Did something happen between you and Seras last night?”

“We just re-confirmed what both of us think. That’s about it.”

“Mm-hmm…”

“…”

“…”

“Anyway, Erika…”

“Yeah?”

“There’s something I’ve been wanting to ask—although it’s mostly just out of curiosity, to be honest. If you think I’m going too far, feel free to ignore the question.”

“What’s with all this formality? Of course, I’ll permit you a personal question.” Erika folded her arms and looked up at me. “So, what does the Lord of the Flies wish to ask of Erika Anaorbael?”

“I suppose I just wanted to ask…why. That’s all.”

“Why what?”

“Ever since we met—you haven’t smiled once.”

She blinked at the observation, and then looked away.

“Well…” She looked back to me. “*That* is what interests you?”

“I wondered if it was just your personality, or if there was some deeper reason behind it.”

Maybe I wasn’t the only one that noticed—everyone else is probably just being polite by not asking.

“Living out here on your own for so long, there’s nobody to smile at. You forget how.” She looked down at the floor, swinging her long, perfectly shapely legs as she sat on the windowsill. “Well, that’s the *official* reason. In truth…”

Her legs stopped. “I swore to myself that I would neither smile nor laugh again while that foul Goddess who stole my potential still had her way with this world. I swore that the next time I smiled would be when Vicius was beaten to a pulp so severely she would have no chance of recovering her strength.”

“That’s why when you find something laughable you say ‘ridiculous’ then?”

“Yep.” Erika poked lightly at her thigh with her fingertip.“That’s right.”

It’s a way to stop herself from laughing or smiling when she feels it coming on.

Ridiculous.

The original meaning of the word doesn’t quite fit her use of it, but to Erika…I guess it’s a symbol of her resolve.

“So you mean to say you can’t smile so long as Vicius is still out there, triumphantly walking the continent.”

Erika drew her legs in, and crossed them again. “Well, what do you think? A very deep reason, or a rather simple one depending on how you look at it, no?”

“So the reason you’re sending your familiars out to gather information is less about learning more about the world, and…”

“More to ensure I don’t miss anything concerning Vicius’ current

whereabouts," the witch said, finishing my sentence.

I see.

"I know you've said it a few times now, but you really must hate that Goddess, huh."

Erika was silent for a few moments, staring out of the window. But she wasn't looking at Seras and the others—her striking eyes were fixed somewhere else—the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters, and the outside world that lay beyond its borders.

"I intended to make this place my final home. But perhaps I came too soon. Talking to you, I think I want to enjoy more of the outside world after all."

But as long as that foul stain upon the land is still out there, she can't enjoy a thing.

Erika jumped from the window with a thud.

"That's all for when my contract with this sacred tree is over, though. I can't go running off on adventures with some human right now, Too-ka."

But maybe with those with longer lifespans like Seras and Lis? I'm going to be gone by the time she leaves here.

"Guess you'll have to make do with me coming along as a familiar."

"I will. Much as it pains me. In any case, I intend to see that smile of yours before my time here is done."

I intend to crush Vicius.

"That last line… Too pretentious." Erika folded her arms, and glared at me through half-closed eyes.

"Hmph, I don't mind being thought of as pretentious."

"Well, how should I put this…" She poked her fingers together and looked down at the floor. "…Thanks."

"Hmm? What's with that strange face you're making?"

"Eh? Ah, well. It's just..."

Because I just glimpsed something strange... Something rare—it was just a moment, but it was the first time I've ever seen it happen. I was actually a bit caught off guard by it.

"You don't smile, but you do get embarrassed sometimes, huh."

I figured she wouldn't show other emotions too.

Erika placed both hands on her hips and leaned forward.

“Of *course* I do. Come to think of it...” She scowled at me, a slight shade of embarrassment fading from her face. “I’ve never seen you get flustered, either.”

Now that you mention it, Erika—you might be right.

After that, Erika showed me the rest of the magical items she had on hand, and told me to take any I thought might be useful.

“Here’s a bottle of *sake* as thanks.”

The Japanese *sake* was from my leather pouch, and it teleported to me last night. The brewery was a place in Yamaguchi Prefecture. I’d never drunk any before, but even as a high schooler, I knew the name. I remembered seeing the label on the internet once and searching for the kanji readings for the name.

Erika was quite the fan of her new drink. “Too-ka, I love it,” she said, immediately coming over and clinging to me.

“You really do love alcohol, huh?”

Happy with her *sake*, Erika was ever more insistent that I take anything I wanted.

“You don’t have any more of those teleportation crystals, do you?”

“That was an especially rare find. I got it ages and ages ago,” she said.

“Having one of those would really give us a lot more options in strategy…”*Not just for escaping either—that thing would be good for surprise attacks too.* “You don’t have any idea where or how we might find another, do you? I think you mentioned something about the secret vaults of the Wizards’ Guild?”

“I don’t think the Wizards’ Guild has any more.”

“Oh, hm. How about in the vaults of some other country, then?”

“Hmm, well…” Erika closed her eyes and rubbed her temples with her fingers. “I hear that Yonato has some precious *holy relics* that usually only the holy priest and the queen are permitted to touch. As for the other nations, I believe the Empire of Mira’s Wildly Beautiful Emperor has always been famous for his love of collecting ancient relics. The Great Vault of Mira is a huge underground structure that might well contain some unused teleportation crystals.”

Erika explained that it wasn’t clear what many of the ancient magical items did, and it was always possible that they were only intended for one-time use. It would be a great loss to waste a relic’s

only use just to test its effects, so unused relics tended to pile up in vaults across the continent.

"We can't use them thoughtlessly, then," I noted.

"At least not until an old scroll is discovered that explains what they do."

"I see."

"I'm sure it's also that each country wants to save them for their own side."

"What about the other countries?" I pressed.

"Alion's store of magical items should be especially large. While Yonato and Mira have avoided handing over their items, the other countries send theirs as gifts to Alion."

Figures.

"So whatever precious items the Wizards' Guild has in its vaults essentially belong to the Goddess, right?"

That foul Goddess is robbing these countries blind, but Yonato and Mira have managed to avoid sending these "offerings" to her. Those two countries are on the other side of the continent. Is their location an important factor in all this?

"What's the chance that private individuals have any of these items?"

Erika shrugged. "Who knows what collectors might have found on their own. Perhaps the greatest collector is Erika Anaorbael herself."

I looked up at the mountain of items before us.

"When it comes to personal collections… I don't think anyone could beat you."

After that I asked Erika some questions about the Country at the End of the World before going out to meet up with everyone.

Eve came over and whispered in my ear. "Lis has lots of things to speak with you about—she wants to thank you for all you've done."

Come to think of it, we haven't had the chance to talk alone recently.

I spent the majority of my time before dinner with Lis. She talked about all kinds of things, and I nodded along, listening as much as I could and occasionally answering her questions. The things she asked were mostly just silly or harmless—small talk that whiled the time away.

Even I felt like a burden had been lifted—lighter almost, as if I'd just gotten a breather. Before I knew it, it was dinner time.

"Thanks for hanging out, Lis," I said, standing up.

"N-not at all! I should be the one… P-perhaps I was speaking too much. But… Thank you for listening, Sir Too-ka." Lis' cheeks and eyes softened, and she looked a little sheepish. "I'm so happy I got to talk with you."

She looks so much more relieved than she did earlier. She's like a different girl from the first time we met. I'm so glad she's able to smile like this now, from the bottom of my heart.

"Yeah," I smiled, "me too."

After dinner we stayed in the dining room until we felt sleepy enough to go off to bed. We dropped off one by one, heading to take our baths before returning to our rooms. Erika had already had a bit too much to drink, and had retired quite early. Piggymaru and Slei were sleeping in Lis' room tonight, and they had just left. Erika had taken her golems with her to bed, and so none of them were left in the dining room either.

At the end of the night only Seras and were still at the table. There were still plates left out in front of us.

"Guess we should tidy all this up."

"I suppose we should, yes."

We both stood up from our chairs in unison and began to clear the table. The gentle sound of plates being lifted and stacked filled the room.

"By the way, the room we're sleeping in…"

"Yeah?"

"It's much tidier now than it was when we first came, isn't it?"

"We spent all that time cleaning, just to leave tomorrow. Did you get enough rest today, by the way?"

"Yes. Physically, and mentally too."

"Good."

"Go take your bath first, I'll do the rest," I said, once we were almost done tidying.

"Sir Too-ka." There was reproach in her voice. She placed her hand over mine on the dining room table. "No knight in the world has ever gone off to bathe and left her master to do the dishes."

“Well, then you can be the first.”

“I would be disqualified as a knight for doing something unprecedented. Sir Too-ka, please go on before me.”

I gazed at Seras’ face.

“You’ve gotten more forthright, huh.”

Seras chuckled. “I learned that from you.”

“But I really must insist. I’ll take mine after yours—”

“Or…” said Seras, clearing her throat. Her cheeks turned a cherry blossom pink as she went on softly, “…you can take your bath with me. That would resolve this issue entirely.”

I find it hard to believe that’s the only reason she’s suggesting this.

I kept my head down and sighed as I answered her.

“All right then.”

“…?”

“I mean... After what happened last night, does it really matter if we take a bath together?”

“Eh?! Th-then you mean it?!”

“…I never expected that this would truly come to pass,” said Seras, as she sat beside me in the hot water of the bath. We weren’t completely naked; both of us were wearing bath towels.

I know it’s bad manners to wear towels in hot springs, but this is another world we’re talking about. We’ve got permission from Erika, too.

“If you don’t want to both be stark naked in there, I’ll prepare some towels for you. Use them if you feel like it,” she said. “Ah… I’m ever so kind to you and Seras, aren’t I?”

“Anyway…you were fine with last night, but still embarrassed enough to wear the towel now?” I asked.

“…It’s strange, yes,” she said, sinking down until the lower part of her face was underwater and blowing bubbles from her mouth.

So, even Seras Ashrain hides her embarrassment, huh—it’s kind of refreshing to see.

The hot water was almost transparent, and I could clearly see the lines of Seras’ body as she soaked.

It is strange…she fights so much, but her body doesn’t seem muscular at all. Maybe just a little squeeze…

“Hyauh?! S-S-Sir Too-ka?!”

“Ah, my bad.”

I just lightly pinched her bicep, but I guess I shouldn’t have.

“I don’t think we should do that sort of thing in here…!”

“I was just thinking, given how much you fight, that you’re not terribly muscular.”



“Ah. S-so that’s what that was about. I apologize for interpreting your actions in the wrong way.” Seras’ expression turned serious again. “But you’re right… being brawny and muscular isn’t the only way one is able to draw out their strength. In the truest sense, remaining supple and flexible in one’s body is the best way to train. Or at least so I have heard.”

“I think I’ve heard something similar.”

Mostly from martial arts manga in my case, though.

“You aren’t exactly big and muscular yourself, are you, Sir Too-ka?”

“I think that’s because I have my stat modifiers. It seems those numbers hardly do anything to affect my outward appearance.”

“That’s very interesting. I do agree that your muscles haven’t developed in proportion to your growing strength.”

Her love of literature and knowledge must be aching to find out the reason why.

“Want to touch them?” I asked.

“If you insist.” She gave my bicep a light squeeze. “Ahem, Sir Too-ka.”

“Eh?”

“If you would, like, please feel free to touch mine as well. Touch me wherever you like. You…just surprised me when you touched me earlier and I responded the way I did due to misunderstanding your intentions.”

I can touch you wherever I want then, huh.

“…”

“…”

A strange atmosphere settled over the room. I wasn’t quite sure how to place it.

“What’s happening here? I can’t tell if this is turning me on or not.”

Seras blushed and looked down at the water, looking a little remorseful. “…Ah, yes.”

“We should probably get out soon, huh.”

“…Yes.”

And so passed our last night in the witch’s house before our departure.

It was noon the next day when we came up to the surface, our preparations for departure finished. We were outside the hut by the lake we'd used to enter the witch's domain—Erika, Eve and Lis were there to see us off.

"You intend to break through the western Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters?" asked Erika.

"Yeah. I'd really like to avoid being seen," I answered.

"With the map I gave you, I think you'll be fine."

We won't have Eve with us from now on, meaning we won't have her holographic map showing our distance from Erika anymore.

"I think it's best if we just head straight west from here," I said.

The other route would take us through Ulzan territory, and we'd end up backtracking south the way we came. It'd be too far, and take too long—going west is the shortest way to get where we're going. As long as the world is still occupied with the Demon King, I can move around comparatively freely. We should plan to use this time as efficiently as we can.

Erika placed a hand to her chin in contemplation.

"You might've had that magical war chariot to ride in, but you made it through half of the northern reaches all on your own I suppose. I'm sure you'll be fine in the west. I mean, you did take down an Inner Circle demon after all."

My stat modifiers are higher now than they were when we broke through the northern border—and Slei's grown too.

"I do want to gain some more EXP as we go."

I want to always be building it up, little by little. And there are other reasons I want to pass through the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters, too.

Erika approached, stood in front of me and fixed my collar.

"You're robe's a little crooked. In any case, I pray you make it through safely."

Lis finished stroking Slei and took a step back. She stood up straight and looked up to us.

"Thank you both—please take care on your journey," she said.

"Thank you very much. I wish you both good health," said Seras, her eyes softening as she replied.

"Squee!"

Piggymaru poked out from my robes, echoing her sentiment.

It was the right call to delay leaving another day, Slei and Piggymaru both seem much better rested now than they did yesterday.

"I expect we'll meet again. I'll be waiting," said Eve, drawing herself up to her full height, and folding her arms.

"I'll come back to visit, at least, once all this is over."

Eve nodded. "I'm counting on it, *my master*."

"Good." I turned back to the forest. "Right, then."

I touched the transmission crystal on the back of Slei's neck.

"Time to get going."

We trotted away from the lakeside hut, riding Slei in her second stage of transformation. Seras rode behind me in the saddle, her arms lightly wrapped around my hips and her body against mine. When we'd discussed who should ride in front before we departed, Seras suggested it should be me. We could now ride double on Slei's back, and could move faster than we had on our journey into the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters from the south.

"The Country at the End of the World, huh."

I muttered the name of our destination as I checked the nearby forest for monsters. Seras shifted about a little behind me.

"I was surprised too to hear that it really exists… A hidden country of demi-humans and monsters."

Didn't Eve say she thought it was just a legend?

"You can only get into the country with this *key* that Erika gave me, or with one of those divine beasts or whatever she called them. I hear there are two left on the continent but…nobody knows where they are, or if they're even still currently alive."

Even if we make it inside this country, there's no guarantee we'll make it out alive. It's a country for those hiding themselves away from the world. Will they really just let us leave once we know of their existence? That's why I think we're going to need some way to earn their trust.

"I don't know how much effect Erika's name is going to have on them."

"Lady Erika did mention that if their king has remained the same all these years, they would be sure to help us…"

"*If* their king has stayed the same, that is."

Right now we still don't know the outlook of those living in this Country at the End of the World. Are they hostile to the goddess? How do

they feel about the root of all evil? How will they even react when they see a human?

I looked down.

Could it be that Piggymaru and Slei will be surprisingly useful in proving I have good relationships with monsters? They might be good examples to demonstrate that.

"In any case, I need the help of the Forbidden Words Clan to learn how to use forbidden magic."

I glanced down at the saddlebags strapped to Slei's back, one of which contained the three Scrolls of Forbidden Magic.

Magic that the Goddess herself forbade. I need to know what it is exactly, because that'll dictate how I can use it in my strategies. Depending on how I look at it, my journey might be closer to the end than I think. I'm going to meet with the Forbidden Words Clan and learn forbidden magic… then I'm going to use it to crush that foul Goddess. That's all that's left for me to do.

I just need to eliminate all obstacles in my way and proceed on.

I'm sure Vicius intends to keep everyone right in the palm of her hand. But the Goddess herself is dancing to our tune already. The only remaining question is how far she'll fall for our tricks. The existence of our Lord of the Flies Brigade will only make her more worried.

THE GODDESS VICIUS

"THEY USED THIS CURSED-MAGIC alone to defeat an Inner Circle Demon of the Demon King's armies. Their contribution to the conflict at the White Citadel of Protection was so great, it turned the tide of the battle. There is also the possibility they have ancient magical items in their possession.

"They possess a giant horse-like monster… Former Ashint members that brought doom to the Strongest Man in the World… O *hoh hoh,* not to mention that Seras Ashrain is *alive*!"

Vicius tossed the report onto the desk in front of her.

"This *Lord of the Flies Brigade* interests me—very much indeed."

SOGOU AYAKA

SOGOU AYAKA AND THE OTHER HEROES from the southern front, accompanied by a small detachment of soldiers, returned temporarily to Alion. The rest of the southern army continued on without them

to Shinad, capital of Magar. Stories of the fierce battle at the White Citadel of Protection reached the country ahead of them.

From what I hear, it wasn't just our front that faced intense fighting...

Many of the soldiers on other fronts had been forced into awful battles. In most cases, victory had been pyrrhic at best. The southern army was the same. Considering the number of casualties, it was hard for any of the soldiers to celebrate their accomplishments as any kind of triumph.

…But there were bright spots.

When news spread concerning those considered missing or dead, Ayaka felt a little wave of salvation wash over her.

The "Dragonslayer" Banewolf was alive, even though he would be unable to return to the frontlines due to the extent of his injuries. Still, he was conscious and able to talk. Ayaka rushed to his side as soon as she learned of his survival.

"Sorry… Guess I dropped out of the battle a bit early," he apologized to Ayaka, who had tears in her eyes.

It was enough for her just that he was alive and able to speak with her. He explained that after he was cut down by one of the humanoid types and his transformation faded, he was in no condition to fight and could barely move. He burrowed under a monster's corpse to hide, and luckily managed to survive the battle without being found.

That makes sense, given how many bandages they've got him wrapped in now.

"Well, anyway…least I didn't forget about you, Sogou-chan," he'd said with a smile.

That's right... Ayaka remembered—*his ability steals his memories from him.*

He tried to lift his arm, to reassure Ayaka that everything would be fine—but found that he couldn't. Banewolf settled for a smile, even though his lips were cracked and bloodied.

"It's frustrating, but I don't think I'm going to be able to fight for a while longer," he said, narrowing his eyes at her. "Mind if I leave

the rest of this up to you?"

"Yes," she answered, nodding with determination. "We heroes will defeat the Demon King, Bane-san. Please, you should rest here."

She neatly brought her feet together and lowered her head.

"And thank you… Thank you so much for saving us. The only reason I stand here today as a hero is because of you."

Banewolf was to be returned to Ulza by way of Alion, and so was traveling with Ayaka and the other heroes.

Agit Angun of the Four Holy Elders had also been missing, after saving so many on the battlefield by using his long-range attacks to defend Ayaka and the other heroes from a humanoid type. He lured it away from the fighting, saving Kirihara's group in the process.

He was also found alive—but barely. His injuries were even worse than Banewolf's—the doctor who first saw him said it was a miracle he'd survived.

Ayaka had been to see him, though he was still unconscious. No matter how anyone looked at it, it would be impossible for him to return to the battlefield…but he lived. Ayaka felt a wave of selfish relief when she heard the news.

As for Oyamada Shougo, who had disappeared into a cloud of dust in the confusion, and Yasu Tomohiro, who had shaken off his group's cries for help and fled after losing several of his fingers—both survived the battle.

Oyamada Shougo was found inside the citadel itself, in the corner of a dungeon cell, balled up and trembling with his back to the door. When the soldier who came searching called out to him, he screamed back fiercely in response. After the wailing was done, his shoulders started shaking, and he crouched back down in the corner. Luckily, he had no visible injuries to speak of.

But when Ayaka saw him next, he was transformed—it was as if he were a completely different person. He was so changed that Ayaka wasn't even able to find the words to say to him. He returned with the rest to Alion, but disappeared the moment they arrived at the castle.

Yasu Tomohiro was found on the plains, some way away from the White Citadel of Protection. His discovery came a while after Oyamada's, so he hadn't accompanied the others on their return trip. He was currently traveling back to Alion with another escort of soldiers, according to the news they had received by magical war pigeon. Apparently, he had cooked and eaten the horse he had ridden

away on, unable to stave off his hunger any longer.

"Late... You're late...!" The soldier that found him reported him as saying, *"I am an elite hero, survivor of the southern army! The last hope of the alliance! An A-class hero no less! Send for her at once! Use your brains, you know who I mean! The Goddess! Tell her Yasu Tomohiro's fingers require immediate treatment!"*

Aside from his severed fingers, he was unhurt. From what he had said when he was located, it seemed that Yasu thought that Ayaka was already dead.

Despite everything, they're both still alive. It's a wonder that they survived at all. Those we've yet to hear from are Kashima-san and the others on the western front.

Ayaka was especially concerned about Kashima Kobato—there had been no news yet concerning her safety. Ayaka had heard reports that the capital of Yonato had been turned into a battleground, and that they had suffered devastating losses there.

Kashima-san, Asagi-san... I hope everyone is safe.

"Oh my, oh my. My my my, all of you did wonderfully!" The Goddess Vicius appeared before them. "What marvelous results, even exceeding my expectations! Wonderful! I was so moved to hear the reports! Oh yes, so moved!"

Ayaka and the other heroes stood in the inner courtyard of the castle, a place they had visited many times before departing for their respective fronts. The Goddess stood looking over them all with a hint of nostalgia. There used to be more of them standing there before her —the Dragonslayer, the Four Holy Elders…

The Sabre-Toothed Tigers aren't here—they were on the western front. I wonder what happened to them? Nyantan-san isn't here, either. Come to think of it, I haven't seen her once since we returned.

"Sogou-san in particular!" The Goddess beamed at Ayaka, and clapped her hands together, then approached and took Ayaka's hands in hers.

"That S-class ranking of yours is certainly not just for show, is it?! To say nothing of the humanoid types, I could never have dreamed you would slice an Inner Circle Demon, Second of the Sworn in two! May I speak honestly? I always had confidence in you. My strictness with you was from a desire to awaken your abilities sooner! Congratulations on acquiring your unique skill, true to the S-class name!"

The Goddess poked and prodded with her words. But then—she stopped, like someone had hit pause on a video. Her wide smile froze in place. “Or did you really expect me to be so brazen?”

She paused again, frozen in place, emotionless.

“*Oh ho ho,* that would have been far more familiar, even for me. I was so terribly mean to you Sogou-san. But to completely ignore my past behavior and to suddenly change my tune upon your awakening would be…that would be quite gauche, wouldn’t it?”

Vicius brought her hands behind her back, leaned forward a little, and smiled. “It’s quite all right, I regret my actions from the bottom of my heart.”

The Goddess leaned back up to her full height, and after straightening her back, bowed her head deeply.

“I’m sorry, truly I am. Perhaps it was my clouded vision that prevented me from seeing the hidden talents you possess. Well, the root of all this of course was your cruel behavior to me after the summoning, that left me ever so hurt and confused. But I am a Goddess after all. I must admit to my faults, even when I am not in the wrong, and have the generosity to apologize at times such as these. I truly am sorry, Sogou-san.”

She raised her head and smiled again. “Let us let bygones be bygones, and together defeat the Demon King hand in hand as friends, shall we not? My apologies. It’s all water under the bridge now, isn’t it? *Haah…*”

The Goddess sighed with relief, and placed a hand to her chest.

“I’m so glad you’re clever enough to agree with me, Sogou-san, deeply I am. I see now that this is what it means to be class representative, is it not? Your reason for defeating the Demon King is to protect your friends. Of course! Oh, how laudable of you! Fighting not for me, but for your *classmates*. I can truly, deeply respect that.”

It was the first time Ayaka had ever been on the receiving end of such paper-thin *respect*. But it wasn’t as if the Goddess’ difficult personality was anything new.

“If that’s the case then, Goddess—” she began.

“Yes yes, let us work together from now on,” interrupted the Goddess.

“Considering our mutual forgiveness, might I make one request?” Ayaka asked.

“Oh, we’re on to that already are we? How…greedy of you.”

"I would like to request treatment," Ayaka continued, undeterred. The Goddess' eyebrows arched in reply, but there was no warmth there.

"Eh? Treatment for whom, I wonder?"

"Banewolf-san, Agit-san, Oyamada-kun, and Yasu-kun… You healed Sakura-san's hand when it was severed in the Enchanted Bone Ruins and returned it to normal. Could you treat them in the same way you treated her?"

"Ah, I see. You really are always thinking of others, Sogou-san! That never changes. I expected more arrogance, or for you to be drunk on power perhaps—ah, but no… Even though making a request of a Goddess is rather arrogant by nature, depending on one's perspective…" She gave a wry smile, and placed a hand to her mouth. "My, my, there I go again letting remarks like those slip out, and ruining the mood. *Oh hoh hoh*, don't pay it any mind. You don't *mind*, do you?"

Ayaka ignored her provocations and pressed her. "Can you do it?"

The Goddess froze up for a moment before answering.

"Hmm, not that I *couldn't*, of course…but Oyamada-san's issue appears to be mental in nature. Not something that will be easily treated. In addition…well, my Heal does have some side effects."

"Side effects?"

"My ability can heal almost any injury, no matter how severe. But it sometimes causes those I cast it upon to fall into a deep sleep. I cannot guarantee when they will awaken." She yawned, covering her mouth with her hand as she went on. "Of course it's not for certain that any particular person I heal will be put to sleep. I have myself yet to comprehend the factors that lead some to succumb to it, and others to remain entirely unaffected. Some awaken after only a short rest—but it's certainly true that the more severe one's injuries, the higher the chance of a prolonged resting period."

So her ability is divine, but not all powerful, then. Some even die before they awaken—it's essentially a gamble. But this means there's a high probability that Bane-san and Agit-san are going to have to recover for a long time, doesn't it? Does that mean that we shouldn't rely on the Goddess to treat their injuries?

"If we're confronting the reality of our situation and not getting lost in our ideals, it is a waste of resources and manpower to care for those we cannot even be sure will ever awaken. That is why I do not wish to rely on Heal where possible. More than all that, it does also

rather wear on me personally… It tires me out you, see."

The Goddess took a short breath, as if she were trying to sidestep something troublesome.

"*Particularly* when it comes to you heroes, it's no good to have you sleeping here while the source of all evil is still out there. If heroes are seriously injured just when they are most needed to fight, I do hesitate over whether they are worth saving. Even though it pains me ever so much to make the choice."

She lowered her eyebrows, showing a complete lack of actual concern.

"With the lower class heroes I can somewhat understand, but the S-class heroes? What was the point in summoning you, if only to send you to sleep? Now then, what is it I can do to satisfy you, Sogou-san?"

I heard that it's a miracle Agit is alive—his condition is still unstable.

"I would like to ask you to treat Agit-san."

"Understood. But you owe me one."

"And Banewolf-san and Yasu-kun are still conscious. I'd like you to consider healing them, if they each agree after having the side-effects explained to them."

The Goddess' eyes narrowed, her golden pupils staring down at Ayaka, who was supporting herself with a crutch.

"Agreed, let us do as you say. Ah, and Sogou-san?"

"Yes?"

"I'm sure you understand all I've said. Do hurry up and get better soon, won't you? I'm ever so pleased with how strong you've become, but I'm sure you can't fight in that state."

"Y-yes…" said Ayaka resolutely, turning to face the Goddess head-on.

"Well then. If that is all, Sogou-san…" The Goddess straightened up and grinned at her. "We might not be able to do much about our mismatched personalities, but let us try our best. Both of us would do well to finally start being adults about this."

She turned on her heel.

"Now, I have some minor business to attend to, if you'll excuse me. I will send my subordinates to give further orders momentarily, please wait here for a while."

Before leaving the courtyard she turned and gave another bow, then disappeared into the castle. Kirihara emerged into the courtyard

as soon as the Goddess left.

"Oh, so it's you, Sogou."

"Kirihara-kun."

Kirihara Takuto walked toward her, adorned from head to toe in heroic gear. He stopped in front of Ayaka.

"I'm glad to see you back safe, Kirihara-kun."

"This is what she meant, huh?"

"Eh?"

"Sogou—you were worried about *me*?"

"Eh? Yes? I heard that the Demon King appeared in the east. And so—"

"You seriously believed that *I* would lose to the Demon King? Have you that little imagination?"

He seemed agitated about something. A moment later, two other elite heroes appeared in the courtyard—the Takao Sisters, completely unharmed from what Ayaka could see.

Hijiri-san and Itsuki-san are safe too… I'm so happy.

"Ah, but listen, Kirihara-kun," Ayaka said, changing the subject. "I'm sure you've already heard but… Oyamada-kun, he—"

"Word has reached these ears of mine, Sogou."

"Yes, he's very—"

"Killed an Inner Circle Demon did you?" Kirihara asked, cutting her off.

"Eh?" She was taken aback. *He wasn't talking about Oyamada just now?*

"A big one, too. Second of the Sworn, they say. If it was meant as some show to demonstrate your current stats, then far be it for me to stop you."

"If you're, like, worried about the gap between the class rep's stats and yours, just come out and say it," Takao Itsuki broke in, as if she were talking to herself.

Kirihara swept his bangs back, a stunned expression on his face. "You don't get it, Itsuki. It's obvious. Sogou only defeated the Second of the Sworn, whereas I sent that Demon King packing with his tail between his legs. The gap between us is plain as day. It surpasses blinding in how obvious it is."

Ayaka's discomfort continued—*is Kirihara not even worried about*

Oyamada Shougo?

She looked at Kirihara's group lined up behind her. When he first appeared they had all made to run to him, but now she saw them hesitating.

"Hey, class rep, heard you've finally got a unique skill now, huh?" Itsuki asked Ayaka.

"Eh? Yes, well…"

"Heh, Kirihara, like, totally can't talk down to you anymore can he?"

"Me?!" Kirihara stopped rubbing the back of his neck with his hand, and looked over at Itsuki uncomfortably. "Your memory is too short, Itsuki. Stop making up convenient lies to suit yourself."

"Shut up already!" Itsuki glared back at him. "Tryna make out like you were the only one who made the Demon King retreat. Aneki was the real one who—"

"It's okay, Itsuki," Hijiri stopped her.

"But Aneki!"

"It's true that Kirihara-kun's newly leveled unique skill is what pushed back the invading waves on the eastern front."

"Finally starting to lick my boots, are you, Hijiri? Well…" He snorted triumphantly. "At last, you're coming to see the true Kirihara, if only through a small crack in the door. Your hanger-on sister should follow your example—accept what is clear."

Itsuki groaned and clutched her sister's arm.

"I can't even with this guy. He's so annoying."

"Nothing to be done about that—this is another world, after all," noted Hijiri. She then turned to look at Ayaka.

"How are you feeling, Sogou-san?"

Feeling oddly happy at a considerate question, Ayaka couldn't help but smile. "I think I'm going to be able to recover. But I think it will take a little while longer until I'm back to my full strength at this rate."

Hijiri was silent for a moment before she spoke again.

"It wasn't the Second of the Sworn that did this to you, was it?"

The injuries Ayaka received from Zweigseed weren't the reason she needed her crutch. The places his blood sword sliced at her hardly ached at all anymore. It was the toll that the *kyokugen* technique had taken on Ayaka's body that was affecting her—much, much more than

her visible injuries. But her body wasn't broken, it just needed a long time to rest.

I had no idea that I would feel this exhausted, even with my hero stat modifiers assisting me.

Ayaka had been able to create one "thread" in battle. The masters in ancient times were said to have been able to layer many of those same such threads together—in their own time, they were known as Supreme Masters.

I can't even imagine what it would take to have two threads. Will I eventually reach their level if I keep training? Far exceeding my current self—into the realm of the truly strong.

"Actually, I—"

"You don't need to tell me any more about it," Hijiri interrupted her, and then glanced over at Kirihara for an instant.

"Eh?" *Could it be that she doesn't want Kirihara to find out what it is that's causing my injuries?*

"Anyway, like…" Itsuki put both hands on the back of her head. "You beat up one of those Inner Circle Demon thingys then, right, class rep? How much didya level up?"

"Right now my level is…"

Come to think of it, what level am I?

Everything had been such a blur after her fight with the demon, she had forgotten to even check. "Status Open."

Only the Goddess and each of the heroes themselves were able to check their stats, so Ayaka had to say the number out loud.

"Let's see…it says that I'm Level 499—"

Whoosh…Clink!

"Eh?!"

Ayaka's body reacted without her even thinking—but that was a mistake. She moved as if she were fresh and battle-ready, but the pain that raced through her body told her she wasn't.

"Kirihara-kun, you…" It was Hijiri—there was a note of accusation in her voice.

Ayaka looked up to see Kirihara's blade, frozen in place right before her eyes.

No…he didn't stop—he was blocked.

Hijiri stood by Ayaka's side, her longsword unsheathed and held up horizontally in front of her.

Ayaka's heart was beating fast. *What just happened?*

Kirihara had suddenly tried to slash at her—and Hijiri had jumped in front of her with her own sword, parrying the blow. Cold sweat poured from Ayaka's body.

Not as cold as Hijiri's gaze, which was sharp and questioning as she looked at Kirihara. Any warmth in her voice was gone when she asked, "What were you intending with that attack, Kirihara-kun?"

That attack just now, Kirihara-kun, he… There was clear murderous intent behind it.

He slowly drew back his sword, and placed it back in its sheath. "It's obvious, but I suppose I have to spell it out."

Ayaka truly had absolutely no idea what was obvious about the situation. He sighed and continued on calmly.

"It was a test, nothing more. Soon we're going to face off against the Demon King. You aren't going to be able to fight out there on the field if you aren't capable of dodging attacks like the one I just made."

Hijiri sheathed her sword as well.

"No matter how you look at it, Sogou-san is far from her full strength at present. If you wish to know how strong she really is, might it be more logical to at least wait until she has recovered?" she suggested.

"Sogou couldn't handle my attack. You looked at the situation and judged that you had no choice but to stop it. You blocked…" He tapped a fingertip to his temple. "And I predicted it all—to a frightening extent."

"You intended to kill Sogou-san, didn't you?" Hijiri asked.

Kirihara clicked his tongue, as if trying to play off the question. "Do you really think there would be any value in an attack that had no intent to kill behind it? People talk about fighting for *dear life*, don't they? You've got to be earnest…"

Kirihara wasn't acting the sore loser. He was entirely unrepentant—speaking every word as if all of it had been expected.

"If Sogou had been unable to block and died, that would have simply been her fate. But I won't give up so easily. She won't be able to keep up in the battles to come, and neither will you, Hijiri."

"It looked to me like your actions appear to have been set off by some opinion of yours regarding Sogou-san's level."

Kirihara stroked the hair on the back of his head, looking irritated. "That was just how it *looked* to you, nothing more. I didn't

take you to be some crude individual who'd disparage another on mere speculation, Hijiri."

"I told you Kirihara, quit talking to Aneki like—" Itsuki started to shout, but she was loudly interrupted.

"Hey, Kirihara!" It was Murota Erii, from Kirihara's group.

"What?! What was that just now?! How dare you, Murota?"

"Never mind me. What are you thinking?! The class rep saved our lives you know?! When you left, it was, like, super dangerous out there! You didn't hear about any of that?!"

Kirihara frowned and looked at Murota in silence.

"You don't have anything to say for yourself?" Murota said.

"She was lucky to have survived," Kirihara replied eventually. "But from here on out things are going to get even tougher…"

"You're wrong!"

"…"

"Can't you see?! Or are you ignoring it on purpose?!" Murota stuck her hand out wildly behind her to gesture to the rest of Kirihara's group. "Ikumi's gone!"

Kirihara turned his head to the side.

"I see. A dropout, then," he said after several seconds had passed.

Murota's expression crumpled, her face twisted. "What the hell…? That's your reaction?! I knew it, there's something wrong with you. You've been weird ever since we got here, Kirihara!

"Ikumi's dead, you know?! We, like, don't even have her body. We couldn't even tell which one was her! We can't just heal her up like we did with Sakura! You get that?! You remember Ikumi, yeah?! Well, she's gone now!"

Tears streamed down her face—as if everything she'd been holding back had broken free all at once.

Ayaka remembered the aftermath of the battle. At first they had all been overjoyed to hear of Banewolf's survival, but before long the initial rush had settled and a wave of loss swept over them. It had been just the same when Hirooka Akiyoshi and Sakuma Haruhiko, the two boys from Yasu's group, died in the stampede.

The death of a classmate—it was both so terribly unreal, yet at the same time felt as if it opened up a hole in each and every one of their chests. After it happened, Princess Cattlea assisted them all with

the funeral. Many people cried—even those who hadn't been all that close to Kariya Ikumi in the old world.

"There's this young economist guy," Kirihara turned to Murota—there was an admonishing tone in his voice. "Friend of my parents. He has a channel with over 200,000 subscribers—and there's this thing he once said. The more willing countries are to cut their losses with dropouts, the faster they grow. And those who allocate resources to the dropouts just make the whole country poorer and poorer for everyone else, apparently."

"What?! I have no idea what you're blabbering about right now! I mean what…economics stuff?! That's got nothing to do with Ikumi being dead!"

"I mean that instead of wailing and whining every little time someone dies, you should use that time more productively and improve yourself. Wasn't that obvious?"

Murota closed in on Kirihara, swung her hand back behind her and—

Kirihara caught her wrist before she had the chance to bring it forward in a slap.

Murota's nose screwed up and wrinkled.

"This isn't a joke, Murota! Has Sogou poisoned you?" He clamped down hard on her wrist.

"Th-that h-hurts…!" Murota's face twisted in pain.

Itsuki placed a hand on the hilt of the rapier at her waist, ready to draw.

"Stop it. I won't allow any more of this," shouted Ayaka.

"You don't even know what self-defense is?" Kirihara replied.

"Perhaps Murota-san was the first to raise a hand against you. But I want you to try to understand how she's feeling right now, even just a little."

"Spend all your time being considerate to each and every insignificant person's feelings, and you're never going to be a winner," Kirihara said.

"It's precisely in times like these that being considerate is so important."

"You aren't any different to those idiots who think they can solve every problem with effort and determination, are you? Remember the past world. The winners back there were all those who never cared for one second about other people's feelings. If you want

to win, you just need to show strength. Quit letting rules and ethics get in your way."

Ayaka prepared to use her *kyokugen* technique—the only way she'd be able to move her body in her current state.

I hate having to do this…but there are some things that can't be communicated with words alone. I've learned that here—in this world. Perhaps, just once, I need to demonstrate this power to him directly.

…Only to disable him though—not to injure. Yes. If I use the Kisou technique intended for the capture of enemy generals, then—

"Hmph." Kirihara let go of Murota's wrist. "Looks like you're up for it. But I can see that Hijiri's going to get in our way. I can't help but conclude that this would be a waste of my time."

Murota's knees gave way and she dropped to the ground as Kirihara walked past her.

"And, well, when I made to slice at you earlier?" He stuck out his arm. "If I'd *really* meant it, I would've used Dragonic Buster."

Several small golden dragons appeared in the air around him. They twirled in the air, encircling Kirihara as they flew, as if they were guarding him.

"Looks like Murota and the others have moved over to your side. Guess you get to take care of them now."

"Kirihara…" said Murota, turning back once as she walked away from him, tears still in her eyes. The golden dragons encircling him stopped.

"The great reformers of the world are never understood at first," he said. "Those that stand at the peak of humanity are always subject to the winds of misguided, wrong-headed criticism. That is the loneliness that comes from being king. No matter the era, it seems there's nothing to be done to help the foolishness of commoners who have stopped thinking for themselves.

"That's why the great must ignore the bleating of their lesser and show them *results*. In the end, you're all going to come to know who the *true* king is. Learn from history—study it. The truly great may face misfortune in their own times, but are always judged highly by those that come after. I cannot abandon my destiny."

He shot a glance at Ayaka.

"In any case—there's a peak that those with softness left within them cannot reach." Kirihara cracked his neck. "All I can do is to brush aside misfortune, and your lack of comprehension, and continue to show how right *Kirihara* truly is. Can't argue with history now, can

I?"

"You don't need to say it, Itsuki," said Hijiri, stopping her sister before she burst in. Kirihara sighed in exasperation.

"Do something about how low those boiling points of yours are, too—you in particular, Itsuki."

Itsuki stuck out her tongue, the playful gesture at odds with the serious look in her eyes.

"Anyway Sogou, we're getting off topic—turns out they survived then, eh," said Kirihara.

We're finally back to talking about Oyamada Shougo then.

"How was Seras Ashrain in person? Just like the portraits?"

Eh?

"I hear she's in some group called the Lord of the Flies Brigade now? Tch…she's put herself in completely the wrong company, hasn't she."

What is he talking about?

"I hear that the Lord of the Flies or whatever his name is took down the First of the Sworn. It's really starting to stand out what a disgrace to their own name these Inner Circle Demons are."

"I don't think that's true. The Inner Circle Demons were fearsome enemies."

"Hmm, possibly. But they lost to someone who wasn't even a hero—that's more than enough to conclude that they were nothing more than pathetic wimps. If this cursed-magic power is bound by the laws of this world, then it's got a barrier to its strength.

"And anyone calling themselves a *Lord* isn't a true king, anyway. Tch… Him and Seras are both big fishes in their own tiny little pond." He placed his hand on his sword. "It will be left up to me to show them both just how out of their depth they really are."

Ayaka and the other heroes waited in the square until a servant of the Goddess arrived to convey her orders. They were told to return to their dormitory and remain on standby, and also given several instructions and other cautions in the meantime. They were also informed that there would be an investigation in due course concerning the Lord of the Flies Brigade.

Kirihara wasn't present to hear any of it. He left the square after his incident with Ayaka.

"Hey, the Goddess said we're s'posed to, like, wait here for orders!"

Itsuki had called out to him as he walked away.

"We often have barbecues at our place, my parents call their acquaintances over. Someone came recently, this person who made it big in online business. Here's what they said: 'There isn't a single person with a successful business today who sits around and waits to receive orders.' You get it, right?"

Ayaka sat in her private room. The sun had set, and Takao Hijiri had come to visit. There was a table before them, and their chairs were set so close together that their shoulders almost touched. Hijiri was writing something quickly with her pen on a notepad in front of her.

"It sounds like your side had quite the tough time of it," she said.

They were exchanging information—apparently the notepad and pen were in Hijiri's uniform pocket when she had been teleported to this world.

Smartphones can't connect to the internet or charge up here, but analog items like pens still work…until their ink runs out. Still, in another world like this that notepad and pen look almost out of place.

"But Belzegea-san, the one I mentioned earlier—he helped us avoid the worst-case scenario I believe," Ayaka replied.

The worst-case scenario: the complete destruction of all the southern front armies and the White Citadel of Protection. All our classmates wiped away along with it.

"Hmm."

"Hijiri-san?"

"This Belzegea character…where do you think he stands, Sogou-san? It does seem he isn't with the Demon King, given the Inner Circle Demon he killed," noted Hijiri.

"Seras-san was with him, so I thought he might be an ally of Cattlea-san's."

"They vanished after the battle, didn't they?"

"Yes, so I heard. Went north I think."

Hijiri pressed the back of her pen to her lips in thought. It was a small gesture, but strangely captivating in its own way. Her long eyelashes tilted down ever so slightly to the table, and her thin lips looked healthy and lush.

"Their group didn't join up with the Princess of Neah after the

battle then. That implies Seras Ashrain can't return to Neah as things stand—or there's some reason that prevents her from doing so." Hijiri stopped for a moment. "Tell me more about Belzegea. What was he like?"

Ayaka relayed everything she could of their conversation together, and her impression of him. Hijiri's pen raced across the notepad, quick but never scrawling. Her writing was clear and beautiful.

"Hard to know whether he's an enemy or an ally…or if he might become a friend to us in the future."

"I did feel he was someone I could trust."

"When someone reaches out a hand to help them in a time of great danger, most humans do tend to end up trusting that person. There are even conditions like Stockholm syndrome—human emotions and impressions can change at the drop of a hat when dramatic events are involved. One day someone might be lifted up, praised in interviews and on television, but after a single scandal their reputation falls to rock bottom in an instant. Have you ever seen this happen?"

"…I might have, yes."

There was this one celebrity who was supremely popular, until one night it seemed everybody chose them as the target of their criticism.

"Be careful, if you're only able to look at things from a one-dimensional perspective you're far more vulnerable to deception." Hijiri sighed. "I apologize, I've gotten off topic. So Belzegea—he may be an ally of Neah, but not necessarily on the side of the Sacred Alliance."

"Ahem, you mean—"

"I mean that he's not necessarily a friend of ours," Hijiri finished.

Ayaka's eyes dropped, and she folded her hands in her lap. "I would like to avoid fighting against him, if possible…" she said.

"I'm not saying he's necessarily an enemy. You could even say that Kirihara-kun is much more openly hostile."

"Hey, Hijiri-san." Ayaka clasped her hands together, and was silent for a few moments. Hijiri waited quietly for her to continue. "The things that Kirihara-kun says… Do you think he's right?"

"Since you're asking me, may I take it you have you've been somewhat taken in by his arguments?"

"Eh? Ah… I don't know. I think maybe I'm still just naive. That

maybe that soft part of me is what got Ikumi-san killed."

If I had only awoken my kyokugen techinque sooner, we wouldn't have lost so many.

Is this all because I've been too soft?

"You're right—and you're wrong," said Hijiri, watching Ayaka punish herself. She spun the pen in her hand. "Peoples' sympathies change depending on their positions, it's natural. We're subjective creatures, through and through. That's why there are people like Kirihara-kun who think that because they're the ones in power, they'll never be dealt a losing hand. In Kirihara-kun's case he always assumes that he'll never become one of those *dropouts* he speaks of. I think it will be rather difficult for him, should he happen to end up in that group at some time in the future."

Hijiri was silent for a while, then tapped the end of her pen twice against her lower lip. "But I think perhaps that wasn't the answer you were looking for," she said at last.

"No, it's fine. Thank you for giving it so much thought, Hijiri-san."

"I think you should continue to believe in what you think is right until the very end, Sogou-san."

"What I think is right…"

"From what I have observed, many of our classmates now follow you—*rely* on you. For now, isn't that answer enough to your question?" Hijiri continued, "Perfection does not exist in this world. There is nothing we can do, except the best that we can. Limited creatures as humans are, I believe that is enough."

"Hijiri-san…" Ayaka let slip a little laugh. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," she replied indifferently, and continued with her questions. "Given the general mood, may I take it that Nihei-kun, Murota-san, and all the others are going to be joining your group?"

After the servant of the Goddess had dismissed them in the square, it had been Ayaka who went to speak with them personally, asking Murota, Nihei, and all the others behind them if they wished to join her.

"Those two groups were both abandoned by their leaders after all," noted Hijiri.

"Yasu's alive, but Nihei and the others said they didn't want to work with him anymore. Murota and her group said much the same—that they want to be with me."

“What’s Yasu-kun going to do?” asked Hijiri.

“I’m going to try to invite him. It would really help to have another A-class hero with us. Well, it’s not just that... Unless I offer, he’ll be left out there alone, an outcast.”

Hijiri sighed. “I respect you.”

“Eh?”

“And while it might be rather interfering of me …”

Hijiri proceeded to make suggestions. First, that Ayaka’s group be divided into smaller squads, with a sub-leader for each. Suou Kayako to lead Suou squad, Nihei Yukitaka to lead Nihei squad and Murota Erii to lead Murota squad. Hijiri noted that it would likely be difficult for those who weren’t particularly good friends to co-operate together.

“I would also advise that you decide on a lieutenant to make decisions in your place should you be unable to lead the whole group yourself. Personally I would recommend Suou-san.”

“I agree, Suou-san can be counted on.”

She’s grown so much now. I only learned recently that apparently Asagi reached out to try and recruit her. She gave clear instructions to keep everyone together in the last battle. I’m so glad that Suou-san came to be a part of my group. But I wonder what it was that drew her to me in the first place?

She hadn’t been one of the *dropouts*, heroes scheduled for disposal by the Goddess, Ayaka recalled. Her mind went back to the old world. Suou Kayaka didn’t seem like she had a lot of close friends in class—that of course was one of the reasons Ayaka used to talk to her regularly, to see how she was doing.

In any case—I have a lot to thank her for.

They continued their conversation. Ayaka was amazed at how much Hijiri had discovered, especially that she knew an unusual amount about the other world in which they now found themselves.

“Did you know there is a large library in the castle?”

“Yes, I did,” said Ayaka.

“Did you know about the closed stacks, too?”

“…No.”

Closed stacks…just like in the old world, books that you aren’t allowed to take out by yourself. You’re supposed to ask the librarian to go and get them for you.

“I got permission from the Goddess, so I often go there for research.”

“I see…”

Ah. There it is again…

A faint, sweet fragrance came drifting over from Hijiri’s direction. With how close they were sitting, Ayaka noticed it right away. Hijiri looked at her side-on.

“Bothered by the smell?” she asked.

“Ah, I’m sorry—ahem, is that perfume you’re wearing?”

“I myself am a foreign presence here, but by wearing this perfume from this world it puts the locals somewhat at ease. It is my silent appeal to them that I’m trying to accept the culture of this world.”

Amazing to think she’s thought about it that deeply. It’s not just that though…

“Hijiri-san… You really are pretty.”

“You just said that out loud, you realize?” Hijiri pointed out, her hand still writing on the notepad before her.

“Ah.” Ayaka put a hand to her mouth. “I-I’m sorry.”

“I’d recommend you refrain from making unconsidered comments about the appearances of others. I’m sure you don’t realize it yourself, but when it’s coming from you, some people might interpret what you’re saying as meanness. You are at least aware of how unmistakably beautiful you are, aren’t you, Sogou-san?”

“Eh? I’m not—”

“*’I’m not really pretty?’* you were about to say?”

“Ah…”

“It’s possible others might misinterpret that response as well. I think you should stop using it.”

Ayaka’s shoulders began to tense up. “I’ll be more careful.” Then she snickered a little.

“What is it?” Hijiri asked without taking her eyes off the notepad.

“Well, it’s just I think I understand now why Itsuki likes you so much.”

Itsuki had looked well enough, but was apparently fatigued and was asleep in her room.

“We’re the same age, and yet you seem older than me. Almost like a big sister I can go to for advice.” Ayaka had no older sister of her own, but had always wanted one.

“We are twins, and so the difference is simply which of us came out first at birth. But I suppose being consistently treated as the eldest by my younger sister during our childhood has shaped me.”

“Hey, Hijiri-san.” Ayaka’s expression was serious now. “What you said earlier, about the groups…I think you’d be better than me at leading everyone.”

“Impossible.”

Ayaka was a little taken back at the speed of her rejection.

Hijiri clarified, “You may not realize it, but there are many students who have taken a disliking to us sisters.”

“That’s not true! Or I don’t think it is, anyway… Even so, I think if they all just learn more about you, then—”

“Aside from each person’s individual preferences, there exists a certain harmony within each group. Those entering from the outside can upset the balance, even though they have no intention of doing so. Don’t underestimate that fact. Adding us to your group now will ruin its balance completely—of that, I am sure.”

She went on. “Some relationships work best when there is a suitable distance between all parties. I do intend to help us all return to the old world, of course.”

“I understand. I won’t try to force you.”

“I know it took a lot of courage to ask. My apologies.”

“No…I’m more than happy to hear that you’re willing to help. It’s okay. Just so long as we don’t let anyone else die, and make it back to the old world, then I…”

Ayaka suddenly realized that Hijiri was staring at her, as if trying to work something out.

“Sogou-san. This is just a hypothetical, but—”

Hijiri’s searching eyes were now fixed on the door. She wrote something down and then slid the notepad over to Ayaka.

“Just work with me,” the note said.

“…If I were to tell you that I have romantic feelings for you, what would you say?”

“Eh?!”

Ayaka noticed Hijiri’s eyes were trying to tell her something—

she was looking at the door.

Ah, I get it. There's someone outside. I can feel their presence. That's the reason Hijiri wants me to go along with what she's saying.

Ayaka took a deep breath before answering.

"I-It would all be so sudden, that…I-, well…I'm at a loss for how to answer."

Hijiri smiled at her.

Wow…

Ayaka was captivated, despite herself.

She must be smiling like that because that's the way she wanted me to respond.

"I have no intention of pressing you for an answer right away. I simply wished for you to be aware of my feelings. I might begin attempting to close that distance between us in small ways moving forward—unless you have any objection?"

"Eh-ehm…I don't know. This is all happening so fast…I haven't had any time to think about how I feel."

"Am I bothering you?"

"It's not that, i-it's just…ahem."

Is it because of that smile from earlier?

Ayaka knew Hijiri was acting, and yet—there was a strange tingling in the beating of her heart that just wouldn't stop.

Ah, but this might make my reactions to her advances sound more convincing.

She felt something strange about how clear-headed she was managing to be about this.

Hijiri made to stand up from her chair. "Wait a moment. This is important…I'll go and check there's nobody in the hallway listening in."

Ayaka felt the presence moving away as Hijiri walked to the door, then turned back to the table to take a seat once more.

"Nice work, Sogou-san."

"Would you mind explaining that to me?"

"*That* was to create a misunderstanding. I might be coming to meet with you more often from now on. I would rather my actions not be viewed with suspicion."

"Ah, then that's why you…"

“So long as the rumor that I have a romantic interest in you spreads, we can convince others that my attraction is the reason why the two of us are meeting more often.”

Hijiri-san’s probably plotting something—throwing the Goddess off her scent.

“I was a little surprised, though,” said Ayaka.

“I’m sorry, it was unreasonable to ask that of you so suddenly.”

“Well, that was certainly part of it,” said Ayaka, letting slip a laugh. “But you can smile after all, can’t you Hijiri-san?”

“I’m not good at forcing smiles for others, but I’m not incapable of smiling when I feel like it, you know?”

“I see.”

“My smiles are natural. Cultivated smiles are convenient, and there’s a demand for them out there in the world. I simply am not good at cultivating them.”

“*Heh heh,* that’s an interesting way to think about it.”

Hijiri placed a hand on her cheek, and looked at Ayaka with warmth in her eyes. “So much of you is natural as well, isn’t it?”

“Y-you aren’t making fun of me, are you, Hijiri-san?”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Ayaka looked over to the door. “I wonder who it was on the other side of that door,” she pondered.

“From the way their footsteps and presence were so masked as they left, I believe it was almost certainly one of the Goddess’ lackeys. I was tailed on my way here, in fact, all the way from my own room. I did throw them off when I was able. My pursuer from earlier must have finally realized that this is where I went.”

So they stopped in to listen once they found her.

“You’re like the main character in some spy movie,” said Ayaka.

“Perhaps my S-class stat modifiers have something to do with it. But you noticed their presence too, didn’t you Sogou-san?”

Come to think of it, yes. Perhaps the reason she was able to sense Kirihara-kun’s murderous intent before he acted was due to her stat modifiers as well?

“You were about to say something before we were interrupted earlier, weren’t you?”

Hijiri closed the distance between them, like she was about to tell Ayaka a secret. Ayaka swallowed.

“This is just a hypothetical at the moment, but I wish to ask nonetheless,” said Hijiri.

“R-right…”

Hijiri’s eyes were clear—looking straight into hers. “If I told you there might be a way to return to the old world without relying on the Goddess—what would you say?”

Chapter 3:
Dark

IT HAD BEEN SEVERAL DAYS since we left Erika's house and many monsters had attacked us on our way. We set off from the deep interior of the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters, after all. We'd even encountered a humanoid type, but we crushed them all.

I could clearly see the difference between the monsters here in the west and the ones we'd fought in the northern reaches—those in the north were far stronger. We managed to get through most of the north using our magical war chariot's awareness blocking ability, but even the monsters we faced in the northern outskirts were about twice the strength of any we had faced in the inner reaches of the south and the west. I shuddered to think of what it would take to pass through the north unaided.

"That'll do for today, I think."

Before long night would fall upon the forest.

"Good work today, Lady Slei," said Seras. She dismounted, and I followed suit.

"We really are fast with you on our side, huh." I stroked Slei, and she brayed happily, drawing in closer and rubbing her head against me.

The Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters was also officially known as the Great Ruins. There were buildings that were left over from some old civilization that dotted the forest, sometimes with properly shaped rooms still standing. We found a suitable space to rest inside such an abandoned building. After we'd gotten ready for bed, I sat down and opened my copy of *Forbidden Arts: Complete Works*, keeping my reading light to a minimum. Seras watched me as I turned the pages with a frowning look on my face.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"I was just thinking about Piggymaru's last enhancement solution. It's unfortunate, but we might not be able to make this one."

"You may be right." Seras had read a fair amount of the book on our journey together.

She must remember what it says on this page, then.

The problem with the last enhancement solution was simple—getting hold of the necessary ingredients. There were lists in the page

margins of where each ingredient could be found, but each had been crossed out, until finally at the end of the exhausted lists was written: *"Currently unobtainable. Experiment success, but further replication too difficult to proceed."*

The ingredients came from a monster named a "purple beetle"—there was a picture of the creature and a helpful guide to which parts were needed in the book. I checked with Erika but she didn't have one in her collection, and had no idea where we might find one.

"Sorry, but I don't know. I'd love to get one of them myself in fact, if you ever do catch one," she'd said.

"It's a rare monster," I mused, "but there's a chance there might be a purple beetle in this big mixing pot of monsters we find ourselves in now. I haven't seen one so far, though."

"I have been on the lookout, but have not yet located one yet," said Seras.

"There's a chance they're just completely extinct now."

I should maybe just assume Piggymaru's last enhancement solution isn't happening for the time being.

"Let's get some rest, morning comes early," I said.

"Understood."

We don't have Eve's map to help us get our bearings anymore, but Erika's map is coming in handy in its place. There are buildings and slopes on here that we can use as a guide to keep from getting lost.

The next morning, we stepped out of the ruins and headed west.

"Almost halfway there, I'd say," I said, looking at the ruined building in front of us and comparing it with the one on the map.

The halfway point. Since we started at the witch's house in the inner depths, I don't think we can really consider ourselves to be deep in the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters anymore.

The location of the Country at the End of the World wasn't marked on my map—I decided to remember the place that Erika pointed to with her finger before we left instead. I was worried that someone might get a hold of this map with the location marked.

"Would you like to use this building for tonight?" asked Seras.

The door looked to be closed with the usual mana crystal—one of the few safe places to be found in the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters, assuming it was empty. We steered clear of any building that looked like an entrance to some underground ruins.

“I’d like to give Slei some rest, yeah. Somewhere she doesn’t have to worry about getting attacked in the night. This place looks good.”

“Squee?”

Piggymaru realized something; Slei turned in the direction of the presence too. It was coming closer.

“…A squirrel?” I said.

It looked just like a regular squirrel. They were few and far between, but there were some of the animals I was accustomed to seeing in the old world living here in the forest.

Suddenly the squirrel stopped, and rolled over, showing us its belly.

“Oh, it’s Erika.”

Before we departed we agreed on a number of different signals that Erika could use with her familiars to communicate with us. This was one of them.

I took out the communication scroll from my backpack and spread it out on the ground. The squirrel sat up and approached it.

“Are you one of Erika’s familiars?”

“Squeak!”

Seras bent down to take a closer look, breathing a sigh of relief. “I’m glad to see you’ve recovered enough to use your familiars, Lady Erika.”

“Squeak!”

“Let’s talk once we’re inside, eh?” I looked at the building behind us.

We opened the door and walked in. The room was built like a storehouse with shelves stacked up against the walls. All were empty now. There were also no signs of life or monsters inside, no hidden doors or passageways. It looked to be a fine place to spend the night, apart from the dustiness.

Safe for now, I looked down at the luggage we’d brought with us and picked out a bed sheet to spread out on the floor, and unfurled the letter scroll on top of it.

“Squeak!”

The little squirrel, sensing its time had come, scurried onto the scroll and—

“Ah, wait a second.”

“Squeak?”

Seras sat upright, with her legs folded neatly underneath her. She skillfully caught the squirrel in her hands and placed the animal softly onto her lap before beginning to wash its feet with a clean piece of cloth.



“I do apologize for taking such liberties, but I believe if we are to use that scroll multiple times in the future, then we must not dirty it. Stay nice and still if you please, this will only take a moment.”

Once the little squirrel’s feet were clean, it clambered back onto the scroll.

It began spelling out its message, one letter at a time. It took a while, but we had more than enough time before we needed to go to sleep. Eventually—just when Slei was really drifting off—the squirrel’s first report was done.

“So, all the groups except Ikusaba Asagi’s have returned to Alion, huh? Does it look like they’ll strike out against the Demon King any time soon?”

The squirrel moved to the marker indicating “No.”

“It doesn’t appear that the heroes in Alion will make their move yet. Lady Erika believes that’s because Sogou-san has yet to return to her full strength.”

“Sogou can kill Inner Circle Demons and humanoid types now after all. Vicius has to keep her power close whether she wants to or not. She wants to make sure she’s able to take down her natural enemy, the Demon King. She should want to send her strongest fighters, the three S-class heroes, into battle in top condition. I feel like that’s the reason they haven’t made their move yet.”

The Goddess doesn’t have any guarantee that she can win without Sogou Ayaka, otherwise she’d be hurrying the other two S-class heroes off to take down the Demon King without her. That buys us a little time.

I continued to ask questions, the squirrel rushing hurriedly between the “yes” and “no” symbols on the scroll to answer.

“Is Asagi Ikusaba’s group currently in Yonato?”

It had been several days since the large-scale attack, but apparently the group of heroes were still stationed there, though the Sabre-toothed Tigers were reportedly making their way back to Alion.

Did their group take so many casualties in the fighting that they can’t move them yet? All the information gathered in Erika’s report is from around the capital of Alion, so there’s a chance some of it’s old news. Ikusaba Asagi’s group might well have already left Yonato by now.

Well, in any case we know their goal is to defeat the Demon King. I think it’s safe to assume that Ikusaba Asagi and the others will meet up with Sogou eventually.

“Glad all the Sabre-toothed Tigers on the western front made it out okay,” I said to myself. Seras looked a little taken aback.

I guess she's surprised I'm giving my personal opinion on them.

"I believe you talked of meeting them in the Mils Ruins?"

"They were the only mercenary group down there that were actually worried about my safety. I'm just happy people like them are still safe and sound, that's all. They might be on the Goddess' side, but if it came to battle I don't think I'd be able to kill them. I've gotta return the favor. I know it might be naive of me, but that's how I feel."

Seras placed her hand softly over mine.

"Sir Too-ka, I rather like that side of you."

"Squeak!" The little squirrel folded its arms and puffed up its chest, looking distinctly displeased.

"Save the flirting for later, eh?"

"Sque-squeak!" The squirrel nodded.

Seras blushed and placed both hands on her cheeks. "F-flirting..."

"Erika, you haven't been speaking, but you've been moving that familiar around for a long time now. You sure you aren't tired?" I asked.

The squirrel posed with its arms in the air, showing its little biceps in response.

Seeing a squirrel pose like that…if I didn't know the person behind it, that thing would really creep me out.

"If you've still got time, are Eve and Lis doing okay?" I asked, after we'd finished.

The squirrel pointed to *yes*.

"That's good to hear."

After Erika promised to continue to provide us with information, I opened the door to let the squirrel out and it scampered off into the forest.

"She even has familiars in the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters…" I said.

"I believe she mentioned the number and scope of the familiars she can maintain are thanks to the spirit's assistance," said Seras.

"I see."

She didn't talk to us directly, but controlling her familiars like that does take a toll on her. Considering Erika's recovery time, and the time it'll take for her to get more information, it should be a while longer until the

next report.

We rested for the night, then made our preparations and left the ruins. The two of us mounted Slei, and set off into the forest just as dawn was breaking.

"It wasn't just the White Citadel of Protection that suffered a large-scale attack then, was it," noted Seras.

"Judging from the location where their generals and Inner Circle Demons appeared, they might've intended to break through on the eastern front or take the citadel itself. But from the numbers in the reports, it doesn't seem like either attack was a decoy."

That battle was too large to have just been a skirmish. That's clear from the records of past battles too. They were intending to take down all their enemy's battlelines at once if possible—sweeping all the heroes away too.

"Heroes From Another World develop especially fast. They probably thought it best to crush them as quickly as possible."

The source of all evil this time around is smart then. Short, decisive battles are the key to defeating the heroes. If we're comparing it to battle manga, it'd be like the final boss and all the elites appearing in the first chapter and attacking the main character before the story can even get started.

"Maybe the Demon King is learning from history," I suggested.

"If he is, then don't you think he might attempt to invade again soon, before they have time to rest?"

"Not sure. It'd be best for me if he just went up north as far as he can go and stayed bunkered up there."

"The Sacred Alliance suffered significant casualties on all fronts. If there is a push of similar scale attempted again, I wonder if they could hold."

"I don't even know that myself."

Seras and I began to talk through the situation.

Apparently, the Magnar's only remaining forces were the White Wolf Riders stationed in the east. Not just that, the White Wolf King himself was lost in the fighting, and had yet to be located. In Yonato, the Holy Priest and the Holy Order of the Purge had essentially lost all their strength.

What was left of the Four Holy Elders that have been sent back to Alion, so they're out of the picture too. Looking at it from a military perspective, it was questionable whether these countries could even

defend their capitals anymore.

Two of the newly chosen Bakossi Elite Three were already dead. The Black Dragon Knights had certainly been lacking in strength before, but now, they were all but destroyed. It'd take them a long time to recover from all this. Bakoss also a lot of soldiers in the battle at the White Citadel of Protection—Neah didn't suffer as badly, but a good portion of their troops were gone too.

"The nations whose armies are comparatively still intact are Ulza, Mira, and Alion."

The Monster Slayer King, Wildly Beautiful Emperor, and that rotten Goddess' country. Respectively, they controlled the Monster Slayer Knights and the Dragonslayer, the Band of the Sun, and the Heroes From Another World and the Thirteen Orders of Alion.

But Erika did hear that the Dragonslayer's injuries after the last battle were grave. It would be almost impossible for him to return to the battlefield.

"I guess that's about it," I said, after I'd finished talking the situation through.

Seras placed a fist to her mouth and nodded. "Ulza and Mira did not assign armies to the fronts directly, and kept their forces in reserve in the recent battles, unlike Alion…" she noted.

"…and the two countries we're currently closest to just happen to be Ulza and Mira. I hope they don't get in our way," I said, almost inviting bad luck by saying it out loud.

"Slei, stop for a minute will you?" I dismounted and crouched down in the dirt, looking at the ground carefully.

"Sir Too-ka?"

Seras dismounted too, and leaned in to peek over my shoulder.

"Those are…human footprints, perhaps?" she asked.

"Most likely. Could be a bipedal monster wearing shoes I suppose..." I looked in the direction the footprints led. "Seems like multiple sets of footprints."

Seras' eyes followed mine.

"…Sir Too-ka."

"You smell it too?" *It's faint, but definitely there.* "It smells like blood."

I brushed the ground near the tracks with my fingertips to check the condition of the soil.

“Seems like they passed through here some time ago.”

If whoever it was kept going, they shouldn’t be around anymore.

“Let’s keep going,” I said, standing up.

“Agreed.”

We continued to follow the tracks carefully, and eventually came out of a dense thicket, when…

“Those are…” Seras swallowed.

There were over a dozen golden-eyes monsters before us—all of them dead. The whole area was covered in blood. It was stuck to the leaves and tree branches all around the clearing. Chunks of flesh littered the area, like the aftermath of some gruesome crime. I kneeled in front of the nearest corpse to inspect it, then turned to survey the rest.

“Well, this is a surprise.”

We aren’t in the depths of the forest, but everyone on the continent is supposed to fear the monsters here in the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters.

“It seems some of them tried to run.” Seras noted.

Sure enough, there were signs that some of the monsters had tried to escape.

Whoever slaughtered them like this clearly doesn’t think much of the monsters in this forest. Not to mention they didn’t let any of them get away. Some of these monsters were stabbed in the back, completely defenseless. Whoever did this took the trouble to pursue and kill them.

“A lot of these monsters look like they were killed with a sword. What do you think of their skills, Seras?” I asked.

“They appear to be incredibly experienced fighters,” she replied, without hesitating.

“Better than you?”

“…I could not comment without crossing swords with them, but it is clear that these individuals are unusually powerful. Beyond that…”

“You think this isn’t the extent of what they can do, huh?”

“Correct.”

Who are they? What are they doing all the way out here?

We continued to follow the footprints, which led to the west—the same direction we were headed. The whole area was littered with monster corpses, some of which were already being pecked at by

scavenger birds.

"From the tracks, it looks like there are at least eight of them."

We haven't encountered a single golden-eyed monster since our meeting with Erika's familiar. Are all the monsters in this area hiding because they're afraid of these guys?

"If this group is hostile to us, they might prove problematic to deal with," said Seras.

"Mira and Ulza are the closest forces nearby…"

They could be the Monster Slayer Knights, or the Band of the Sun. I suppose the Country at the End of the World is closeby, too. But there is one more group it could be…

"I think I might know who this is, but I don't know anything about them besides their—"

Rustle.

I stopped mid-sentence as we emerged from the brush. Seras' eyes opened wide, and she swallowed.

"Th-those are…"

I could feel unimaginable waves of shock wash over her, and I couldn't blame her. These corpses were different from the ones in the clearing. These were in a gruesome state, practically torn to pieces.

"H-humanoid types," said Seras, her voice sounding dry and cracked.

In the past the Goddess had to rely on the Civit to defeat these terrible things. I suppose Sogou Ayaka's now proven herself capable of defeating them, too.

I checked the condition of the corpses, and the area surrounding them.

"From these tracks, this wasn't the result of monsters fighting among themselves. Humans killed them."

"I don't know how strong these things were when they were alive, but they tried to escape, too."

So this group was so strong that even the humanoid types tried to run from them. When it comes to famously strong fighting forces:

The Goddess.

The Heroes.

Alion's Sixth Order of Knights.

The White Wolf Rider's Chief Rider, the "Black Wolf."

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

Then there's another group whose name I've heard... But I have almost no information about them. Eve mentioned

their great strength in passing to me once, but nobody could tell me anything about them. I think their name was…

"The '*Sword of Courage*,' wasn't it?"

???

"I FOUND IT—I finally found it, Lewin!" shouted.

Toado as he came out of the bushes. He always was the fastest runner, and the best scout the *Sword of Courage* had.

"Hidden with illusion magic like we thought then, was it?"

"Yeah. After I got through the illusion, the road continued for a bit. Then..." Toado took out a scroll from his pouch as he explained, pointing to a picture on the parchment as he unfurled and held it out. "This crystal—it was there. Same color, shape, everything."

"Good work," said Lewin Seale, patting Toado firmly on the back. "Now we can really save the world."

Yugung smiled, swinging his great axe over his shoulder. "If we're successful here, the Goddess can relax and focus on the Demon King. You did good, Toado."

"Nah," Toado replied, hanging his head. "This was thanks to everyone. All the hard work we've put together to get here."

"You're right, Toado. This is precisely what happens when we all work together." Lewin rubbed the bottom of his nose, looking on with pride.

"But that doesn't change the fact that you're the one that found it for us, does it?!" shouted Miana, playfully jumping on his back from behind.

"H-hey, stop it, Miana!"

"What's that, Toado? Gettin' all flustered just 'cause Miana's on your back again? Never grow up, do ya!" Everyone burst out laughing at Yugung's comment, and Toado started to grumble.

"Tch. There you go embarrassing me again, Miana."

"Don't I always?"

"Can't argue with that," said Yugung, setting everyone off

laughing happily again.

"If Toado has found where we are heading, we should also call Strife back," said Satsuki, leaning up against a tree with his arms folded. He always was a little apart from the rest.

Alaine turned off to the southwest, a worried look on her face. "Strife…I hope he's okay."

"You too, Alaine. When are you going to get over that worrying streak? You're going to make Lewin fret about you even after the two of you have got together, yeah?"

"Oh, Yugung, you…" Alaine blushed, "You're always saying things like that."

"Sh-she's right. Stop it with the jokes, Yugung!" said Lewin, whose face was turning a flustered red as well.

"Hmph." Miana puffed out her cheeks and pouted.

This again, thought Lewin.

Whenever the others made fun of him and Alaine, Miana would get upset like that—ever since they were kids.

They hadn't changed—not since then.

Lewin. Satsuki. Toado. Yugung. Miana. Strife. Alaine. Karo. Birdwitcher. Nannatott.

All of them had been friends since childhood, together for as long as they could remember. Every one of them except for Lewin was born in the slums. He was the son of a noble, but Lewin didn't care for positions and titles. He played with the other nine children all the same. One day, he left home without saying a word to travel the continent with his best friends, and to take on the world out there by working together.

Karo had a nostalgic look on his face.

"With the ten of us combined, there ain't nothin' we can't do… We've always been unbeatable."

Birdwitcher cackled and folded his arms behind his head. "Y'say unbeatable, but y'think we're stronger than that Strongest Man in the World, eh?"

"Not a man we could defeat, I don't wager. If there's anyone who might be up to the task it would be…" Nannatott grinned.

The seven of them looked to Satsuki and Lewin as if placing their bets. In the end three looked in Satsuki's direction, and four to

Lewin.

Yugung turned his gaze from Lewin to Satsuki. “It would be one of you two. Wonder which, eh?”

The *Sword of Courage*. That was the name of their group, what others called them. But to nine of them, only Lewin Seale *was* the Sword of Courage.

“With the blood of one of those Heroes From Another World flowing through your veins, Lewin, I bet you could take down the Strongest Man in the World for sure. As for who else might be able to pull it off…” When Yugung paused, they all turned to look at Satsuki. “Nobody but the *Zanjin* Satsuki comes to mind.”

“Are you serious?” Satsuki snorted with disinterest. “Taking the Strongest Man in the World a bit lightly, aren’t you? Well, it would all depend on how effective our techniques are against him. I do want to test them out some day, although I do not expect to be victorious.”

“That’s rich coming from a man who took down a humanoid type practically on his own. When it comes to monsters…” Nannatott scratched his head, a cold sweat running down his forehead as he fixed Satsuki with a hard and piercing stare. “I think you’ve got my vote.”

Lewin nodded. “He’s right. It’s always been a goal of mine to catch up to your level, Satsuki.”

“From my perspective, the real monster here is you, Lewin.” Satsuki snorted again.

“Th-that’s not true! I still have so much further to go.”

“Being overly modest isn’t a virtue, Lewin.”

“…Sorry.”

Satsuki turned his back, as if to set the topic aside. “If you have a weakness, Lewin Seale—it’s how kind you are. Someday, that kindness might end up destroying you.”

“Yeah, I’ll never forget it.” Lewin looked straight at Satsuki’s back, his eyes clear and determined. “*Heh heh*, thanks for worrying about me, Satsuki.”

“Hmph.”

There was a sound—the rustling of leaves.

“You’re late, Nyaki!”

A small girl with faint peach-colored hair appeared. Her large hands were more like the paws of a cat than a human, with claws to match. Her arms and legs were covered with fur the same peach color

as her hair. Her cat-like ears pricked up, and her tail fluffed out behind her as she walked, with bits of twigs and leaves stuck in her fur.



She was quite short, the tips of her ears only reaching up to Lewin's chest. Her face was decidedly human, with charming round eyes that were the same faint peach color one might expect. Nyaki steadied her shallow breathing as she swayed a little, unsteady on her feet. Considering the massive backpack that she was lugging around, that was only natural. She was clearly carrying far more luggage than any of the *Sword of Courage* members.

"Meow, Nyaki's sorry she's late!" Nyaki bowed to them, but wobbled a little as she lowered her head and lost her balance.

Crash!

Several of the pots and pans that had been attached to the side of her backpack clattered to the ground. Nyaki went pale, set the backpack down on the ground and was quickly moving to pick everything up, when Lewin's lips twisted in anger.

"Nyakiii!"

"Meow?!"

His kick sent her flying, and Nyaki's back collided hard with the trunk of a nearby tree.

"M-meooow…" She lay motionless and limp on the ground.

"Come on you, get up." Karo grabbed her by the arm and dragged her to her feet, before flinging her across the clearing once more.

"Nyah?!"

She landed at Lewin's feet, and his fists shook as he looked down at her. Everyone's eyes were on her—their looks were cold. There was anger, scorn and loathing there. "Alaine loves those pots and pans, they're important to her! How…how could you treat them like that?!"

Alaine covered her face with her hands and began to cry. "Why...why is Nyaki always so mean to me?!"

"Nyaki is so very sorry!" Nyaki panicked and kneeled before them, her face to the ground. "Lewin-san, Alaine-san, everyone… Nyaki regrets it from the bottom of her heart!"

"Always just words with you, isn't it? Nothin' under the surface!" shouted Yugung, as Toado grabbed Nyaki up from the ground.

"Myeoow?!" she yowled, but didn't resist.

"You aren't sorry at all, are you?! You think kneeling on the ground like that and apologizing makes it all better, huh? There ain't no heart in anything you say!"

“So sorry! Nyaki is stupid like everybody says she is, so she can’t apologize in the right way! She is just so sorry! Meow!”

“Annoyin’ as always, jeez. Why can’t you even make an effort to fit in?” Miana looked away and started playing with her hair.

Karo stepped on the back of Nyaki’s head as she kneeled. “Your head’s still too *high*. Get your forehead down there, buried in the dirt, yeah? You’ve gotta be crazy to think that’s an apology right there.”

“Sh-she’s so sorry, meow!” Nyaki pushed her head hard into the dirt. “Really, she’s sorry! Please forgive!”

“Ain’t a sincere thing about that, you sub-human trash.” Birdwitcher let out a sigh that was thick with disgust. “Don’t just do what we tell you; learn to realize it on your own. Sickening, aren’t you, right down to the core…”

“Don’t have the brain to think for yourself, do you?” Nannatott began throwing pebbles at her—one hit Nyaki in the temple and she screamed in pain.

“Myeow?!”

“Crying out like that as if *I’m* in the wrong, eh? None of this is my fault!”

“Nyaki, get up.”

“I-if you could remove your foot from her head, Nyaki…would greatly…appreciate it, meow…”

“Show me some guts, then.” Toado put more weight on his foot, pushing Nyaki’s head to the ground. “You don’t have the guts, do you?! Don’t freakin’ mess with me!”

“C’mon, get up already!” screamed Yugung.

Alaine continued to sob uncontrollably. “I can’t take it! I want this journey with Nyaki to be over. I can’t stand this anymore!”

“Keep it together, Alaine,” said Lewin. He fixed Nyaki with a harsh, piercing stare. “Nyaki, get up. Toado, Karo, you two move your feet.” The two others moved away at the order and pulled Nyaki to her feet, with one hand under each of her shoulders, until she was standing.

“Let me give you another chance. If you want to stay with us, with the *Sword of Courage*…what is it you think you need? You’ve never gotten this question right, not once. My patience with you has almost run out.”

“Ehmm…”

“Quickly now.”

“L-Loyalty? Meow?”

“Nyakiii—!” The terrifying pressure of the blow, and the wind that swept in with it, blew Nyaki away. She was hit harder than before, the back of her head cracking against the thick tree trunk behind her.

Lewin’s breathing was ragged, his shoulders heaving. Miana walked over slowly and sidled up beside him.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“…It hurts.”

“Eh?”

Lewin clutched at his chest. “Don’t you understand, Nyaki?! It hurts my heart so much more to have to hit you. Dozens and dozens times more than it hurts you! It hurts me, Nyaki!”

“Lewin!” Miana embraced him as he burst into tears. “We know. We all know that you’re doing this for her sake.”

“Miana. But I…”

“Hey, Nyaki?! Hurry up and apologize alread—huh?”

She wasn’t moving.

“Hey, Nyaki! Get up already!”

“Wh-whoa! She’s still alive, yeah?” A cold sweat ran down Yugung’s face as Toado rushed over to her.

“It’s fine. She’s just unconscious,” he said, breathing a sigh of relief.

“Jeez, why’s she gotta make it so confusing? It’d be hard for us to face Goddess Vicius if she ended up dying here.”

Lewin wiped his tears, broke off his embrace with Miana, and stepped forward.

“For now, let’s just send a magical war pigeon off to Vicius-sama with the good news. Let her know we’ve found it.”

Nannatott made the preparations as ordered and released several of the pigeons from his cages. For a while they all just stood and watched as the birds disappeared from view. The group relaxed, feeling that a good part of their task was done.

“Just a little further now,” said Lewin.

“Yeah. It’s been a long road, but now finally—”

“Yugung, quiet,” Lewin cut him off mid-sentence, putting a finger to his lips. “…Something’s coming.”

It was from the southwest, the direction Strife had gone scouting in.

"Strife? Strife's back!" Alaine's eyes were still puffy from crying, but her face lit up at the thought. But the closer the figure came, the more suspicious Lewin grew of it.

"S-Strife?"

It was Strife, there was no doubt about that. He walked out from the shadows of the nearby trees toward them.

"—one… R-ru…n…" His voice was trembling.

"…Eh? Wh-what? I-it can't be…" Alaine's eyes filled with tears, and she placed both hands over her mouth in shock.

"I-I… Alai-ne, I-I alwa-ys… L-o…" There was an arrow stuck in Strife's neck—sticking clean out the other side. He fell forward before he could finish and crashed to the ground, dead.

"Wh-why? Eh? What's happening?! What the heck is going on?!" Miana was distraught—Yugung tried to hold back his tears, his eyes fixed forward on the forest.

"I know how you're feeling, but you have to calm down, Miana!"

"It's not real, it's not, it's not! This isn't happening! No! Nooo!"

"Miana!" It was Lewin who called out to her in a grief of his own.

They all knew Lewin was feeling this loss most of all as they heard the sorrow in his voice, clear as day. Miana was a mess of tears, her knees giving way beneath her she stumbled to the side. She was supported by Toado who wore a dismayed expression on his face.

"What do you think?" asked Karo, trying to suppress the sad trembling in his voice. He looked straight forward at Lewin, who had his sword drawn, staring down at Strife's body lying at his feet. There were countless scratches on his shoulders and back, and some on his arms too that looked to be defensive injuries.

"These injuries weren't caused by monsters," he said.

We're up against humans, he thought.

Miana was becoming more and more upset. "Was it someone from the forest? Wh-who would even…do a thing like this?!"

In that moment, *they* appeared before them. Lewin Seale saw the disturbance first. He felt a terrible sweat on his palms, and they stuck to the hilt of his sword as he held it in his hands. Lewin nodded and called out to the darkness.

“Who are you?”

The figures appeared one by one, accompanied by only the faintest rustling of leaves. Knights with swords and shields in their hands.

“You’re the *Sword of Courage*, aren’t you?” The men stepped into the light, one by one, following the man in front.

Lewin’s breathing quickened.

“You know who we are. So why…why would you do this?” Lewin had to force the words to come out, his shoulders trembling as he lamented. His breathing and the beating of his heart were spiraling out of control.

“The insignia on your shields—” *That’s not right. They should be allies of Alion.*

The man before him quietly raised his sword.

“We’re here for the *divine beast.*”

Why?

“Why would the Monster Slayer Knights of Ulza b—?”

But the knights moved before Lewin could even finish the thought. With a sudden hail of arrows, the slaughter began.

Spurt!

Lewin’s knees both buckled beneath him, and he collapsed into a sea of blood.

“Haah... Haah!”

He looked up at the sky above, his pulse pounding in his temples as he drew ragged breaths. Blood dripped from his jaw like tears, soaking into the ground below.

“Wh-why?” he gasped. “Why? Why? Why throw away your lives like this?!”

Before him, Lewin lay the bodies of the Monster Slayer Knights, scattered about the clearing.

“Ghaa!” Yugung finished off one of the knights on the ground with his great axe. Of all the members of the *Sword of Courage*—Strife was still the only casualty. More than that: none had even suffered anything that could be called a real injury. The Monster Slayer Knights on the other hand, who should have had the advantage in numbers, were all dead, save one. Their mutilated corpses were a testament to the *Sword of Courage* members’ rage.

Birdwitcher crossed the pools of blood, bringing the survivor to

Lewin. “Lewin, he’s the one we let live, just like you ordered.”

The sole survivor was the first man—the one who had spoken to them before the battle. There was still light left in his eyes, but no fear of his enemies, even in the desperate situation he found himself in. In silence, Lewin slowly reached out for the man’s neck.

“Lewin.” At Satsuki’s warning, he pulled back his hand with a start. Lewin had been about to strangle him without a second thought.

“…Sorry. Thanks for stopping me, Satsuki.” Lewin took a deep breath and sat down on the ground, lazily placing an elbow on his lap.

“You said you were here for the divine beast, right? What do you mean? Tell me everything.”

“...”

“Please just tell me.”

“I won’t talk, no matter what you do to me. Just kill me now.”

Lewin sighed. “That’s how you want to be? Toado, get it ready.”

Toado drew a thin, flattened object from the leather pouch at his hip and handed it to Lewin, who accepted it in silence. The Monster Slayer Knight furrowed his brow in confusion.

“…A file?”

“Specially made, yes. With my strength, I can file through pretty much anything—even human bone.”

A bead of cold sweat ran down the knight’s cheek. “What are you going to do with that?”

“Your fingers.”

Karo picked up explaining from there. “We’re gonna use that thing to file your fingers from the tips all the way down to the hand.”

The knight choked on air. His face drained of all color as he realized what was happening.

“It’s gonna hurt, y’know?” said Yugung. “Gonna hurt so much that maybe you’ll pass out while we’re doin’ it… But we’ll wake you up. Play with the wound until it hurts so much you start to feel conscious again. Then we’ll start filing again until you faint. We’re going to do it again and again and again…”

“Y-you’re insane!”

“Don’t you worry now,” said Yugung, staring down at the knight with cold cruelty in his eyes. “Everybody spills all their secrets before we get all the way down to the hand. Once tried going all the way down, anyway, just to see how it’d look… Nasty, I gotta tell ya. Hard

to look at, even for me."

Lewin rose from his chair looking hesitant, the file in his hand.

"Let's get started."

"W-wait—I don't have anything to tell you! I mean it!"

"But you're lying."

"Eh?"

"Just a hunch, but…you aren't really one of the Monster Slayer Knights, are you?"

"—!"

"That response tells me everything I need to know. Your armor's just a copy made to look like Monster Slayer Knight gear, right? Or am I wrong?"

Lewin's hunches were almost scary at times. Everyone in the group knew that even though he could never give a logical explanation for his intuitions, Lewin's hunches always led them to the *right* answer.

Lewin Seale was *right*, through and through, and that was why he was gifted with such power. Or perhaps it was the result of the blood of those Heroes From Another World in his veins. In either case, his instincts were never wrong…not even once.

"So, you're saying you've got nothing to tell us? But I know that can't be true." A righteous fire blazed in Lewin's chest. He thought of Strife, and tightened his grip on the file, placing the rough serrated side on the tip of the man's finger. "First, the pinky."

The knight blanched.

"W-w- wait, please! P-Please, just wait a minute!" he protested.

Lewin could be heard audibly grinding his teeth.

"Quiet, heretic! It's too late for that! You should have to taste some of the pain that Strife went through! The terrible way you cut him. He must have suffered so much!"

Lewin's face twisted in sadness, and tears began streaming down his cheeks.

"Yes, Lewin, yes!" said Miana as she sobbed beside him, every word filled with emotion. "It hurt all of us just as much—losing our precious friend like that! It hurt—!"

The file made two quick motions, back and forth, and the tip of the man's fingernail was filed clean away. Finally unable to bear the cruel realization of what was about to happen, his resolve crumbled in

an instant.

"I'll talk, I'll talk! I will! I-I'll tell you everything I know! Please, just—"

"This is for Strife."

In that small corner of the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters, the man's screams echoed out, like a wild beast wailing its last cries before perishing.

"Nh…Ah…I-I…I told you, e-everything…K-kill me…"

Karo looked at Lewin, who nodded back at him in reply. He gripped his sword, and drove the blade through the gasping false knight's head. He let out a noise barely recognizable as a human cry and was finally granted the release of death. Satsuki looked down at the horrifying state of the man's hands.

"Didn't expect him to be a Miran pawn."

"Hmm," mused Yugung, furrowing his brow. "There's been somethin' fishy about the Empire of Mira lately. Seems like these guys were here on General Ruheit's orders, but trying to lay the blame on the Monster Slayer Knights. Looks like Ruheit intends on betraying the Wildly Beautiful Emperor and risin' up in revolt some time soon."

"Ruheit was actually first in line in the order of succession, and the Wildly Beautiful Emperor was third. The current chancellor and his brother are the emperor's older siblings, first and second in line to the throne…the system's all bent out of shape. Wouldn't be surprised if his brothers had some bones to pick with him."

"So these were Miran pawns, but also enemies of the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, you think?"

"But what's Ruheit want with a divine beast anyway?"

"I can imagine. When we've got no use for Nyaki anymore, let's finish her off. That okay with everyone?"

All of them nodded, without a moment's hesitation.

Lewin looked away. Something else remained undone. "For now, let's give Strife a proper burial, so we can all say goodbye."

All nine of them could think of nothing else they needed to do more than that. During the fighting, and even after it was done—none of them could help but look to his corpse, lying there.

All of them had loved him. They wanted to say a proper goodbye to him, as best they could.

The members of the *Sword of Courage* started to cry—only

Satsuki had no tears, but nobody could blame him for that. It was the first time any of them had seen a look of dejection on his face before. They all thanked Strife, and said their goodbyes over and over again.

They couldn't carry his body out of the forest—it wouldn't last the journey. They cried as they dug his grave, and stuck his sword into the dirt above it. Once he'd been laid to rest, Lewin spoke the final words.

"You may have passed on from here… But your soul will be with us forever, Strife."

Alaine, who was standing behind him, burst into fresh tears. Miana stood close by and comforted her, tears flowing down her cheeks as well. Lewin took small comfort in their shared pain, the aching in his chest fading as he turned around.

"Huh?" He suddenly realized something. "Where's Nyaki?"

Chapter 4:
Bright

"SIR TOO-KA."

Seras and I were both focused in the same direction. The noise was clear now—and getting closer. I listened out carefully.

"It's running from something."

It's not an act—there's real desperation in the way this thing is running.

We stayed put and waited, ready to jump into combat at a moment's notice.

Suddenly, something leapt from the brush, sending a shower of leaves into the air—it was a young girl.

She opened her mouth wide as if to speak, but hesitated before finally crying out, "R-run, please! Meow!"

Are those cat ears? She's a demi-human?

The girl's hair was a light peach color, and she looked quite short in stature.

Almost like a child. But what would a child be doing all the way out here?

"Are you being chased?" I asked.

The cat-eared girl took a look behind her to check, then stood there in place. "T-there's a terrifying monster! Nyaki came here to find rare herbs for medicine! But the monster came, and…she had to run for her life! Please, y-you have to run too!" she exclaimed.

The girl—Nyaki—pointed off to the south.

"Maybe you already know, but Ulza is that way! Ehm…" Next the girl pointed in the direction we'd just come—the east.

"Nyaki will run that way!"

"You don't want to run with us?"

"Meow?! Well…um, believe it or not, Nyaki attracts monsters! Please, you two should run while you can!"

She really wasn't fooling anyone with that explanation. Nyaki pounded her chest, like she was trying to show off. "What, meow?! Nyaki's fast you know! As you can see she was injured a little by some of those monsters, but Nyaki's tough ♪. Don't worry about meow.

Quickly, run that way! You should go!”

The girl made as if to run past us.

“Hey.” I stopped her in her tracks. “I’ve got a question.”

“W-what? We have to hurry up and run, or...”

“You… When you first came out of those bushes over there. You were about to call to us for *help*, weren’t you?”

Nyaki stopped in place, as if frozen in shock. “Th-that was just your imagination…♪”

“That is a lie, isn’t it?” said Seras knowingly.

“Ny-Nyaki…Nyaki is s-sorry!”

She suddenly turned around at amazing speed, and got down on her knees to bow to us in the dirt.

“Nyaki is being chased, running for her life! There are humans after her. Very, very strong ones! If they… Well, she doesn’t want you two to get caught up in this! So please, hurry and run away from this place!”

This girl is really something. Her own life is in danger, and she’s trying to get us to safety instead of herself? Not just that, but choosing to send us south towards Ulza, and head further into the forest herself to lead them away from us. She swallowed her cry for help, stifled it the moment she saw us. She lied about being pursued by monsters so that we wouldn’t get wrapped up in her problems.

I suddenly noticed the bruises on the girl’s bare arm. “Nyaki... That’s your name, isn’t it?” I asked, my voice trembling.

“Eh? Y-yes. You should run…”

“Your arm.”

“Meow?”

“Did the people who are chasing you do that? There’s no point in lying. We can tell when you’re lying.”

Nyaki was quiet for a few moments, then nodded. “Yes, they did.”

Seras turned her eyes toward me with a worried expression on her face, and nodded.

“I understand. It must’ve been tough for you to answer, but thank you for telling me.” I took the Lord of the Flies mask from my backpack.

Their presence is still far away. I can choose to be the one to go on the attack.

The young girl Nyaki looked confused.

“Ah… What do you intend to do?”

“I’m going to kill the people that are following you.”

“Meow?!” Nyaki jumped in surprise, completely stunned by what I’d just said. “Y-you can’t do that!”

“What’s the problem? They’re trying to kill you now, aren’t they? You want to live if that’s an option, don’t you? Then I’ll go and —”

“The people that are chasing Nyaki…” she interrupted, “They’re the *Sword of Courage*!”

“…Ah.”

“They’re a really powerful group of people! Nyaki even hears they wanted to challenge the Strongest Man in the World from the Bakoss Empire, that’s how strong they are!” Nyaki flapped her paws about wildly, in a gesture that looked like she was trying desperately to add to her statement. There was something she hadn’t gotten across.

The Strongest Man in the World’s already dead, though. Wait—does this mean that they haven’t heard about Civit’s death yet?

The Sword of Courage… The Strongest Man in the World… Does she think that I don’t know who these people are?

“And erm, well also,” Nyaki looked flustered, struggling to add more details. “The people in the *Sword of Courage* are all famously strong.”

Nyaki screwed her eyes up tight, as if the next words were too painful to speak. “They were even strong enough to destroy the Speed Clan, that’s how powerful they are!”

“W-what did you just say?”

“Th-that’s right! Not even the Speed Clan could beat them! Back then the *Sword of Courage* were just children too!”

Nyaki probably thinks that by mentioning the Speed Clan has finally driven home how strong these people are to me. But now it all makes sense. Eve said, “They were just children, barely of age…”

“I see. Right. It *would* be them.”

Seras had been staring at my face since the moment she heard the Speed name. She, too, understood every word, and knew exactly what it all meant.

“The ones attacking Miss Nyaki, then…” she started.

"Yeah."

They must be the ones who killed the Speed Clan—that killed Eve's parents.

It makes sense that Nyaki thinks she has nowhere to run.

But today is the day the Sword of Courage dies.

The approaching presences I felt were still some distance away.

We still have time before they make it here.

"Nyaki."

"M-meow?" There was fear in her voice, perhaps because of the sudden change in my demeanor.

Tch... What am I thinking, scaring Nyaki like this?

I held back my anger, controlling the tone of my voice. "Nyaki...listen. I have a few questions for you. But if it's difficult for you to answer any of them, don't force yourself, okay?"

Nyaki sat with her legs neatly folded beneath her.

"I-it's okay... Ny-Nyaki's fine!" There was resolve and understanding glimmering in her eyes.

I listened out carefully for the faint presence in the forest. We had time—but not much. I focused my questions on a number of specific points. The first thing I wanted to check was how many members were in the Sword of Courage, and the rough ranking of their strength. But there was something else I had to know…

"I see. So they *all* participated in the massacre of the Speed Clan. And not a single one of them regrets it, not even a little."

I don't really get it myself, but apparently they remember the massacre as something glorious. It was some kind of turning point for the Sword of Courage as a group. Nyaki says they often refer to it when they talk about the good old days as they travel. That's why it stuck in her mind —she must've heard so much about it.

"When Lewin thinks back, he often says, 'That's where we began,' meow."

Apparently, he would then look up to the sky, and the others would get dreamy-eyed and stare up there as well.

…Gross.

"B-but…Nyaki thinks it's too dangerous! The *Sword of Courage* are good friends with the Goddess of Alion. People say they're her strongest secret soldiers!"

"Hmm." *I see… So they're affiliated with the Goddess. I guess the reason there isn't much information on them is because they're her covert unit.*

"Icing on the cake," I said. "All the more reason I should crush them here and now."

"Myeow?!"

From Nyaki's perspective, I must be saying the exact opposite of everything she expects me to.

The number of Sword of Courage members remaining—one down, that leaves nine left, two of whom are far stronger than all the others. One is "Zanjin" Satsuki, and the other is the Sword of Courage himself, Lewin Seale. This Lewin guy's decided to give his group the same title he's taken for himself? That's confusing.

In any case, given those monster corpses we saw on our way here must've been their handiwork.

A question came into my mind—my interest was piqued.

The Sword of Courage are strong enough that even humanoid types try to run from them, but it doesn't seem like they participated in the recent fight against the Demon King's armies. They don't even know that Civit's dead yet. It's possible they've been avoiding human contact as they travel. Given they're a covert unit, might be that they don't even know the Demon Empire has started to invade, right?

But then what is that foul Goddess having them do out here?

If they're strong enough to take down humanoid types, they should really be out on the frontlines. She's got them here, doing something completely different. What's more important to her than stopping the Demon King from invading?

Ulza and Mira are nearby.

There's also…

"The Country at the End of the World."

A magical fantasy land, where the survivors of the Forbidden Words Clan are rumored to live. They're the only ones who hold the key to unlocking forbidden magic.

That is all the confirmation I need.

Every move she makes in secret ironically gives me more evidence of what she's doing. The idea that this forbidden magic is a true threat to the Goddess herself.

This magic, this clan…she wants it dead, even if it means taking forces away from the Demon King fight.

“Then…Nyaki, are you a divine beast?”

“Th-that’s what they told Nyaki. They needed Nyaki to open the door to the Country at the End of the World.”

Nyaki straightened her back, placed her hands on her lap, and closed her eyes tightly as they filled with tears. Her hands clenched.

“Nyaki was…Nyaki was going to do her best! Mama-san and Nee-nya always looked after her. Nyaki thought this was her job, the big thing she had to do! She loves Nee-nya. She thought if she did this job then she could repay her. Repay Nee-nya for everything she’s done! But…but…”

Nyaki tripped over her words for a minute. She explained that she had been knocked unconscious, and that just as she was waking up she heard them planning to kill her, and decided to run away.

“When her job was done, the Sword of Courage members said they were going to kill Nyaki! Nyaki will endure lots! Even when she’s sad, she’ll keep trying because there are fun things in the future! Nyaki wants to try as hard as she paw-sibly can! But, but… But if she dies, she’ll never see Nee-nya again! That’s why Nyaki…”

When Nyaki raised her head again, tears were pouring from her eyes in great big droplets cascading to the ground. She forced a smile though—desperately grinning through the tears.

“Nyaki knows she isn’t human. That’s why the humans always call her trash. She’s always getting in their way. But she…she wants to at least see Nee-nya and Mai-nya one more time.”

Nyaki began to sob, letting out intermittent strangled yowls.

Seras went to sit next to her and softly placed a hand on her back.

“I do not know what the *Sword of Courage* members may have said to you, but I can tell you that you certainly aren’t in anybody’s way. That isn’t true in the slightest. To think a little girl like you… That they would…”

Seras was unable to keep the anger in her voice in check.

It’s a little strange that her pursuers are so far behind her, though. From the looks of it Nyaki’s weakened and tired, so I can’t imagine she was running faster than whoever’s hunting her. Not to mention that fur of hers stands out in the forest. She’d be easy to spot.

Nyaki’s a divine beast, the key to entering the Country at the End of the World. How did these Sword of Courage guys take so long to notice she was gone? But then, Nyaki said when she woke up the whole area around her was covered in blood, didn’t she?

Well, doesn't matter now, does it? They're all going to die before they ever catch her—that doesn't change.

The pursuers' presences were finally growing closer. Seras held Nyaki's head gently to her chest.

"I do not believe we can forgive the *Sword of Courage* for what they have done." Her expression was burning with righteous indignation. "I—"

"No, you stay here and protect Nyaki," I interrupted her, then let out a long, deep sigh. "We only had a short time to talk and I need some time to settle down and process all this information. I can't let myself get swept away by my emotions. It's just…hard for me to stay calm right now."

This isn't just about the Speed Clan. Those bruises I see on Nyaki's arms and legs…she's trying to play it off, but she can't hide how exhausted she is. Who does she remind me of…

I remembered back, searching my mind. Back to *then,* the time I was almost destroyed, mentally and physically.

Even now—Nyaki still doesn't seem to hate the Sword of Courage members. She just doesn't want to die. She wants to live. To see her Neenya—just one last time.

So what? It's okay if they kill her after that? She isn't a human, so she's just in everyone's way? …You've gotta be kidding me. The ones who are really in the way—the ones that are going to die…it's them. The Sword of Courage.

"Look after Nyaki for me," I said to Seras.

"Yes." Her face told me that she could sense how furious I was.



She's known me for a long time now. Back in Monroy, when I completely lost it in that tavern with Lis's owner. She understands I can't just ignore situations like these.

"Worst comes to worst, the two of you take Slei and get away from here. I'll leave the rest up to you."

"You can count on me, Sir Too-ka," came Seras' reply.

I donned my Lord of the Flies mask and turned my back to them. I stomped through the forest, cracking branches underfoot as I walked, intending for Nyaki's pursuers to mistake the sound for hers. My anger gave my feet extra weight. My eyes were wide open, glaring toward the oncoming presences. I ground my teeth as they advanced toward me.

I didn't want to risk scaring Nyaki by letting my temper go earlier. But that doesn't matter anymore.

"Time to pay up."

The presences grew closer.

Two of these assholes are going to be tougher than the others, not just average henchmen. I'll want to link up with Piggymaru so we can strike first, but which two are they? At the very least there are seven more of them.

I focused my eyes, and observed the two men approaching me from afar. I had gotten a rough description of the group members' appearances from Nyaki, so I knew who I might be dealing with.

Nope—neither of them are Lewin or Satsuki. Those two are…Toado and Birdwitcher, I think?

I should keep my Piggymaru linking ability in reserve for now.

I took off my Lord of the Flies mask and began to walk toward them.

"You there!"

"Come out!"

I revealed myself, and sighed dramatically when I saw them. "Ahh, boy, am I glad to find you! I was sent here as a messenger of the Goddess Vicius." I added a wry smile. "It was rather difficult to find you."

"Wait! Not one step closer!" one of the men called out to stop me.

I see. Reasonable move, given they can't confirm who I really am yet. They're right to avoid getting in close.

“Somethin’ fishy about you. You sure you’re a messenger of the Goddess?”

“Of course! You on the left are Mr. Birdwitcher, and beside you stands Mr. Toado. You may not remember, but I have seen you both many times in the past. In truth, the members of the *Sword of Courage* are heroes of mine. And so that is why, while I am surely not deserving of the honor, I can offer but a poor imitation of your great deeds through my service to the Goddess Vicius.”

Nobody dislikes being told that they’re a hero.

The two men looked at each other, and their postures relaxed a little.

“…You seen a divine beast around here, by any chance?” asked Toado.

“Peach-colored fur, couldn’t miss ’er,” added Birdwitcher.

I opened my mouth wide and turned pale. “I-impossible…d-do you mean to say the divine beast has escaped?!”

“Don’t worry ’bout it, we’ll get ’er in no time. Left a hecka lot o’ tracks for us to follow, we know exactly where she’s headed. We’ll catch her.”

I covered over those tracks with my own on the way here.

“Already weakened that sub-human trash up good already,” added Toado. “Ah, no need to report all those details to the Goddess though, y’hear? Don’t worry, the mission’s going as planned.”

The two men looked to be starting to relax at last. They walked to me, their faces easy and carefree.

They’re coming to me of their own accord—that’s the beauty of it. The story I gave them is that I know them, but they don’t know me yet. If I were to go making steps to them, it’d make them suspicious no matter what.

“So what’cha want with us?”

“You have heard that the Demon Empire’s invasion has begun?” I asked.

“Finally here, huh.”

“But my message does not concern that now. I have important news concerning your current mission…” I stuck out my hand to them and raised three fingers. “The Goddess wishes to convey three points.”

“Three?” Birdwitcher turned his head to the side.

Both of them are in range.

“Just get to *the* point already. What’s with the three points?”

My three raised fingers had extended into an open palm.

“Firstly, Paralyze.”

“Wh-h…”

“ I…c-can’t m…?”

I took my shortsword from the scabbard at my waist.

“Come to think of it, I don’t remember the other two points.”

“Wh-what…a-are y—”

I approached the two men.

“Gha…?!”

I kicked them to the ground, one by one. They could do nothing to resist, and rolled to the dirt. I crouched down beside Toado and thrust my sword deep into the calf of his right leg.

“Ahh…!”

I twisted the blade as it pierced his leg, then quickly did the same to his left, before standing back up and removing my sword. Next, I walked toward Birdwitcher.

“…?!”

He tried to move but couldn’t.

“I don’t recommend struggling.”

If I just wanted to kill them, I could cast Berserk now and be done with it. That’s if I just wanted them dead, of course.

I did the same thing to Birdwitcher’s legs that I’d done to Toado’s.

“Agh!”

Now neither of them can walk. Right, then.

I dispelled the Paralyze effect on Toado’s head.

“Now, how about you tell me everything?”

“You fr—?! I can t-talk?”

“Can’t move your body, though.”

“Wh-who the hell are you?! You’re freakin’ evil, doing this to us! You ain’t getting away with this!”

“*Evil*, you say?” I looked down at Toado, my eyes cold as ice. “Compared to the things you did to the Speed Clan and Nyaki, I don’t think the things I’m doing are that evil at all.”

“Wh-whaaat?! What the heck are you saying? You found Nyaki,

didn't you! Hurry up and hand her over if you know what's good for you… You don't have a freakin' clue who you're dealin' with—I'm doin' you a favor here, giving you a warning!"

I sighed, exasperated.

"Might as well ask. Was it your group that attacked the Speed Clan's village?"

Toado's black eyes narrowed. "You're mad about the destruction of the Speed Clan or somethin'?"

"…"

"Wait. You...you're a human, yeah?"

"Last I checked."

Toado wrinkled his nose and averted his eyes, looking down at the ground. I'd seen that face before—it was as if he just couldn't comprehend my actions. Before long though, a wave of understanding spread across his face. It seemed he'd come to a realization. Toado looked me dead in the eyes, his expression sincere.

"I get it. Look, I'm sorry. Our bad. Let me apologize at least."

"…"

"You wanted to be the one to kill 'em all, huh? Sorry we beat you to it; we had no idea. Really!"

"Are you kidding me?"

"Eh? Huh? Th-then what? Why else would you freakin' do this?!" Toado sank back into his swamp of confusion.

"You really don't get it, do you?"

"So tell me why, already!"

"It's because she's one of my companions."

"Who is?!"

"A survivor of the Speed Clan."

"Eh?!" Toado's expression hardened.

"You…but you're human! One of those sub-humans is your…? How?" It wasn't an act—Toado's expression was sincere as he continued to speak, though part of his face betrayed another emotion: fear. Not fear of death, but fear of another kind. "B-but they're sub-human trash! A-are you crazy?! Are you seriously insane?! They might look similar yeah, but all those freakin' demi-human races are garbage! They ain't real people, y'know?! You have one as a companion?!"

“Something wrong with that?” I asked.

“C-course there is! You thick, or what?!”

This isn’t bargaining on his part—this is all just what he really thinks. These are the kind of people they are. Makes sense. Now I understand how they were able to do all that to a ball of pure and good intentions like Nyaki, without so much as a second thought.

Toado continued his earnest protest. “Them sub-humans are going to be a threat to us humans someday, no two ways about it! Even if it’s slow-goin’. We gotta destroy them, we’ve gotta try! ’Specially this Country at the End of the World. We seriously can’t let that alone! Erm—”

It seemed he’d gotten carried away and said too much.

“So that’s your wish? To eliminate the Country at the End of the World, and all the demi-humans and monsters that live there?” I asked.

“Ugh…th-that’s right! You gotta wake up too, open your eyes! We gotta join hands and destroy them, all those sub-humans. People think they ain’t dangerous just cause their eyes ain’t golden. But they’re all seeds of evil just the same!”

Toado was getting more and more worked up with every word. “So! So, so, so! Then we’ll save the world! We’re going to do it, together!”

“…What do you think, Piggymaru?”

“Sq-u. Squ-qu-quee!”

Piggymaru’s squeaks sounded different today, trembling with an anger it didn’t normally show.

“A monster?! Y-you couldn’t possibly…! Are you one of those heretics that keeps monsters as pets?! Now it all makes sense!”

“Yeah, that’s right. I’m an outcast. A heretic,” I said.

“N-no! You’ve already been driven insane, haven’t you?!”

“Maybe I have. You’ve got your own standards for what’s right and wrong. I’ve got mine. But you know…”

I stepped down hard on the stab wound in Toado’s leg, grinding into it with my heel.

“Ghaaah?!”

“I guess we’ll just have to agree to disagree.”

I don’t intend to change their minds, just kill them. Annihilate them. Exterminate them so thoroughly that they never rise up again.

If it were Sogou here in my place, she might try and convince them they're wrong. She'd be patient and sincere with them, explain for hours if she had to. After she incapacitated them, she might even try to compromise.

But not me.

"I can't just let guys like you get away. What you did to Nyaki was sick. And if that wasn't enough, you're also the ones that massacred the Speed Clan? And I hear you even talk about killing them like those were the good old days, huh?"

"I-I don't get it! Those *were* our best days, there ain't a doubt in my mind! You don't know what the Speed Clan were really like! You don't know a freakin' thing! Don't pretend you do!"

"I'll bite. What do you have to tell me about them?"

"Listen to this! All the other monsters and sub-humans live in hiding, yeah? But the Speed Clan went off thinkin' up big ideas, tryna find a way out! They were freakin' insane!"

"Big ideas? What do you mean?"

"Whole clan was spouting some evil nonsense, 'bout how if we all took our time and talked with each other, all the species of the world could be friends! They were nuts!"

"…"

"If we hadn't…what would'a happened if we hadn't put them down?! Sends shivers down my spine just thinking 'bout it. *Understanding*? Humans and that sub-human trash? Makes me sick to my stomach just remembering the things they used to say!"

Toado smiled.

"But listen… Lewin always told us—can't kill nobody with hate alone. It'd be hard, y'know, bein' ruled by hate all the time. That's why Lewin said it, when we were huntin' the Speed Clan. He said we gotta enjoy the present while it lasts! After that, we just started havin' fun! Wasn't just killing anymore…we made like a game of it! It was s'posed to just be some fight to annihilate them all, back when we were captives to our own hate. But Lewin made it fun for all of us! He really did!"

Birdwitcher began to cry upon hearing Toado's words.

Guess tear ducts aren't affected by paralysis.

"It was a close one! That weird thinking was really about to spread all over the world! We did good, I mean it! You get it, right?! That's where the *Sword of Courage* really began!"

Toado's eyes sparkled for a moment, but then he suddenly fell despondent.

"But then some fools started taking 'em as slaves, putting 'em on show. Like they didn't understand how dangerous those things are. Even the elves! Wearing human skin to look like us. If only Vicius hadn't attempted to use them too. If only we'd just gone and got them first."

Without thinking, I stamped down hard on the wound on the back of Toado's leg.

"Eeeeeh?!"

"Okay, I think I've heard enough." I delivered an upper kick to his head.

"Unf!"

"Your friend can tell me the rest."

I looked off in the direction they had come. There was no sign that the volume we were speaking at was going to bring anyone else running.

Are the others still further away? If they care about their friends' lives, I could use these two as bait to draw them in.

"…"

But who cares?

It's no use. I don't feel like talking to these guys any more. I can't take it. I'm going to finish them off now.

I looked toward the other Sword of Courage member, Birdwitcher, who was still paralyzed from head to toe. He was crying, his face expressing the whole time that he sympathized with Toado's every word.

Is Birdwitcher moved by his courage or something? Doesn't change the fact that they agree with each other, both of them, in those terrible freakin' ideas that Toado's spouting.

"Gah! My voice will rise, and reach my precious comrades out there in the fores—?!"

Toado tried to call out, and I kicked him full across the face again, sending him rolling over.

"I told you to shut up." I clicked my tongue and took a step away from him. "I don't care how you guys justify your deeds. There's just one thing I know for certain." I stared down at them both, my eyes brimming with hatred. "Seras, Piggymaru, Slei, Eve, Lis, Erika, Nyaki, the Speed Clan… I could never bring myself to hate them."

Toado and Birdwitcher looked shocked—as if they'd met someone they were completely unable to comprehend.

But I don't care if I'm right or not. I'm just pushing my own standards of what's right onto others. I'm not trying to convince them—just forcing them to do what I want.

"You said the Speed Clan made you sick to your stomach, didn't you? You make me feel just the same," I said. "So I'm going to destroy this *Sword of Courage* of yours, starting with you. No complaints, I take it?"

I glanced at a tree behind me. "Piggymaru. After I use Berserk, quickly pull me up into that tree back there."

"Squee."

I stuck my hand out in front of me. Birdwitcher was in my sights.

Single target. I've already disabled both their legs just in case—they'll never be able to run. Even if they do somehow manage to stand, I'll take care of them.

First I dispelled Paralyze on both of them. Then…

"Berserk."

As soon as I fired off the skill, I felt myself being pulled back, and a floating sensation as I rose up into the air. Piggymaru had turned into its rope form and pulled me up into the trees.

"Ghaaah!" Birdwitcher let out a shrill cry and launched himself at Toado.

"H-hey! What are you doing, Bird?! Hey?! It's me! It's Toado!"

Birdwitcher tried to bite at Toado, crouching on top like he was trying to straddle him.

"Calm down! Hey!" As Toado desperately resisted, Birdwitcher drew the sword hanging at his side.

"Wh-what's gotten into you?! Hey!" Toado drew his own sword, and parried the oncoming blade, but Birdwitcher's furious attacks didn't stop. He glared up at me as I looked on, sitting on a tree branch above.

"What'd you do to Bird?!"

"Friend of yours, right? What are going to do now? Lay down and let him kill you? Or kill your own friend to survive? Go on, make your choice."

Birdwitcher turned to look up at me for a moment after hearing

my voice. His eyes were rolled back in his skull, and there was drool dripping from his mouth and down his jaw. He quickly turned his attention back to Toado.

Those targeted by Berserk tend to go for whoever's closest to them, but get in their field of vision, or make a loud enough noise, and they might start paying attention to you instead. Good thing Piggymaru got me out of the danger zone.

"You've gotta be kiddin' me!" Toado raged. "You did somethin' to him, didn't you?! Messed around with him! Stop! How can you be so freakin' cruel?!"

Tears began to stream from his eyes.

"We're the same, you know," I said.

"Huh?! What're you talking about?!"

"I'm scum, just like you."

"You're calling *me* scum?! A-are you freakin' crazy?!"

"Not as crazy as you are."

"Gah! Heretic! Heretic, heretic, heretic—!"

"*Hah!* Coming from you that just sounds like a compliment. Careful now…gotta keep fighting or that precious friend of yours is going to murder you."

"Ghh…g-get a hold of yourself, Bird! I know you're still in there somewhere! You can hear me, right?! Wake up already! Don't give in. Don't let this guy's weird magic control you! You're a member of the *Sword of Courage*, yeah?! You're strong, right?!"

I kinda feel like I've seen this scene in shonen manga before. Yeah. Like the good protagonist is calling out to his brainwashed friend. Can't deny that Toado's passionate speech is sounding a bit familiar. But his words aren't going to get through to Birdwitcher.

"Be nice if that's how things worked. If by some dramatic miracle your friend came to his senses," I said, looking down on the scene from above. Toado glared daggers at me, convinced he was still the good guy in this scene.

He's a true believer. This guy creeps me out.

"Well… Wouldn't make a difference if he woke up, anyway."

"Wh-what?!"

"One way or another, you're both going to die here."

From my branch overhead they were still in range of my status effect skills. If I felt something was wrong, I could fire off my skills at

any moment. I had a proper back-up plan. Toado continued to call out as he parried the oncoming blades, tears streaming down his face.

"Remember, Bird! Remember all the days we spent together! Come back to yourself! Let's defeat that scumbag up there together!"

"Gaghhaaah!"

"Bird!"

Birdwitcher only frothed and attacked with renewed fierceness.

"Cruel! This is too cruel! How messed up do you have to be to do things like these? Are you pure evil incarnate or what?!"

"Hm? You want me to sit up here and deny it?"

"Screw you!" Toado wailed up at the sky above. "I can't do it! I just can't! I can't kill my friend!"

"Figures. Why don't you try calling the others, then?"

"Lewin and the others…?"

"Go ahead and bring the rest of the gang running. I'll catch all of you in one fell swoop."

"…!"

That said… This'll be my first very long-distance ambush attack using my linked form with Piggymaru to kill someone outright. That's the only real attack pattern I'm considering for now—not much of a trap. But at the moment I just want to break this guy's mind.

"Come on, why not call for them? Go ahead and scream for help."

"I-I'm not going to put Lewin and the others in danger just for my sake. Ah! It's no use…you're just too evil! Too messed up! If I can at least just get some warning to them…"

I snorted at him in annoyance.

"Your love for your friends is touching."

But Nyaki wasn't one of your friends. You traveled with her, but you never thought of her like that—not even a little. You couldn't even do that for her. Just because she doesn't happen to be human.

"…"

I stared off into the forest. As I expected, it didn't appear the other Sword of Courage members were about to come running. I felt the vague presence of some living creatures out there, but they weren't human.

The monsters in this area have probably seen all the recent slaughter

of their kind, and they're still wary. It's possible that Lewin and Satsuki might be further away than I first thought. If they were within earshot, Toado would be screaming more desperately for help. He must know they couldn't possibly hear him at this distance.

"In any case, Nyaki managed to make it pretty far away from you guys, even in her exhausted state." I glared down at Toado and Birdwitcher as they grappled below. "You let the key to entering the Country at the End of the World slip away from you? What were you idiots thinking?"

Nah, there's no point in thinking about all that—trying to measure their actions with my own standards of reason. It would be a senseless waste of time. They can't understand me, and I can't understand them.

"Hyah?!" Toado, distracted by looking up at me in the trees, showed his friend an opening.

Birdwitcher plunged his sword into his shoulder.

"B-Bird?! Y-you cut me! You dare to cut me! S-screw you!" Toado swept at Birdwitcher with his own sword, drawing a clean line of blood across his friend's throat.

"Graah…?"

Jeez, finally.

"Uh, Bird? Bird! My bad! I just…!" Toado moved toward Birdwitcher as he collapsed and fell forward, clasping his friend's body in his arms. "N-No, no! I'm sorry! I'm sorry, Bird!"

"Took you long enough," I said, jumping down from the tree.

"Y-you… I'm going to kill you! Crush you!"

"Do you understand now?"

"Huh?! Understand what?!"

"How it feels to be killed by someone who's enjoying themselves."

"Huh?"

"I'm making a game out of this. You know, like you did to the Speed Clan."

"Are you insane?!"

"…"

"I told y-you already!" Toado turned toward me, sitting on the ground and clutching Birdwitcher's corpse ever tighter to his chest as he began to sob. His howl was bloodcurdling through the tears. "I told you, don't lump us in with that sub-human trash! Wake the hell up!"

“I really gotta thank you.” A wicked laugh escaped my lips. “Thanks for being such an irredeemable scumbag, right up until the very end.”

I picked up the sword that Birdwitcher had dropped when he fell.

Toado’s putting on a good show, but he’s lost a lot of blood—won’t be hard to kill him.

“It’d be nothing but trouble for me if you suddenly had some change of heart.”

Toado’s face told me everything—he knew his time was up.

“Ah, stop—!” He turned pale and reached for the sword he had dropped but I cut him down before he even got the chance. He let out a short, strangled scream, and died. Blood flowed down Toado’s outstretched arm, through his fingers and into the dirt.

“Takes scum to fight scum.”

Getting good people like Nyaki and the Speed Clan involved, taking advantage of them, doesn’t sit well with me. Crushing other scumbags, though? That works for me.

I looked down at the two corpses heaped on the ground before me. “When it comes to guys like you, I’ll never be able to choose the same path that Sogou does. I’ll never be able to choose the good.”

When I returned, Seras came rushing to me as soon as I came into view.

“It is good to see you sa—” She stopped suddenly, then sped to me even faster than before. “Are you injured?!”

Slei approached too. Nyaki appeared pale.

“Don’t worry. This isn’t my blood.”

Seras stopped again, and breathed a sigh of relief. “Then is that the blood of the *Sword of Courage*?” she asked once she’d regained her composure.

“Yeah.”

“Have you defeated them?”

“Just the two that were chasing Nyaki. The rest weren’t in pursuit.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Nyaki give a surprised start.

“L-Lewin-san and Satsuki-san are the strongest, b-but all the members of the Sword of Courage are strong… J-just who are you?”

she asked.

"Come to think of it, I haven't introduced myself yet."

We didn't have enough time earlier with Toado and Birdwitcher closing in. Seras and I haven't even told her our names yet.

"Excuse me, but… As we were awaiting your return, I made the decision to reveal my true identity to Miss Nyaki," said Seras, as if preparing herself for a scolding. "I thought that if we are to gain her trust, that we should be honest with her from the very start." Seras glanced over at Nyaki, and then seemed to shrink. "Miss Nyaki is so pure and innocent, that it was just too hard for me to give her false information. I'm so sorry."

I gathered that Seras barely gave her any details about me—she's got a knack for this kind of thing.

"After your fight against the Demon King's armies and the way you revealed yourself, that cat is already out of the bag. There shouldn't be a problem with Nyaki finding that out. And well…" I looked over at Nyaki "To be honest, I know how you feel."

And so, I introduced myself to Nyaki, using my real name.

"Would you prefer Nyaki call you Mr. Too-ka?" asked Nyaki.

"Whatever's easiest for you. Oh, and you should also meet this little guy." I opened my sleeve a little and Piggymaru peeked out. "Introduce yourself," I said.

"Squeee!" Piggymaru popped out of my robes and onto the ground below. Nyaki looked down at it with wide eyes.

"It's a little slime! Meow!"

"This is Piggymaru."

"Squee?" Piggymaru looked over to me for confirmation, as if to ask if the girl was a friend. I nodded back, and Piggymaru stretched out a tentacle in Nyaki's direction. "Squee."

"Piggymaru just wants a handshake."

Nyaki gripped the tentacle, looking a little overwhelmed. "M-my name is Nyaki…"

She still looked stiff, but Nyaki's nerves seemed to have calmed somewhat.

"Oh, and this is Slei."

"Pumpee!"

"Myeow?!"

Slei rubbed her cheek against Nyaki's, trying to cheer her up.

“Nyaki is p-pleased to meet you!”

“Pumpee!”

Nyaki quickly moved to sit down, kneeling and bowing her head to the ground.

“Thank you so much for saving my life. Too-ka-san, Seras-san, Mr. Piggymaru, Miss Slei! Nyaki will never forget what you have done for her. She’s so sorry for causing you so much trouble. Nyaki truly apologizes, she’s so sorry!”

Nyaki raised her head.

“Please, all of you hurry up and leave this place. Nyaki will stay here and rest for a while, then go east like she said!” She pointed to the deeper parts of the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters.

She hasn’t even thought for a second that we might continue to protect her.

“Nyaki.”

“M-Meow?!”

“You’re still talking about all that? Look, this is only if you want to, but…” I stretched out a hand to her. “Why not come with us?”

“R-really?!”

“You can stay with us until we’re able to get you somewhere safe. That’s actually the reason I introduced you to everybody just now.”

Nyaki looked stunned for a few moments, as if she couldn’t keep up with what I was saying. Eventually she seemed to comprehend.

“Y-you can’t! Nyaki will just cause trouble for everyone if she comes along, Nyaki knows it! She’s a divine beast, so the *Sword of Courage* really needs Nyaki for a while longer! They’ll definitely come after her! And when they find out their friends have died, the things they’ll do…”

Nyaki began to sob, even though she was smiling. “It was only for a short time, but Nyaki can tell you are all very good people. She could never… She doesn’t want you to all get hurt. Even if Nyaki can never see Nee-nya and Mai-nya again, she’s s-so happy that she got to meet s-such good people in the end.”

Either the Sword of Courage *catches her and kills her, or the monsters do. Either way, Nyaki’s prepared to die in this forest.*

“Thank you all so much,” said Nyaki, smiling through the tears. “Nyaki feels warm inside, for the first time in a long time.”

I sighed.

"Nyaki, I think you're misunderstanding."

"My-eow…?"

"You said something about the two strongest members of the Sword of Courage being able to challenge the Strongest Man in the World for his title, right?"

"Y-yes."

"The Strongest Man in the World is dead. I'm the one who killed him."

"—?!"

"He's telling the truth, Miss Nyaki," added Seras. "In fact I was about to be killed by Civit Gartland himself, when Sir Too-ka came and saved me."

Nyaki looked up at me in shock, tears still streaming down her face.

"T-Too-ka-san… *You* defeated Civit Gartland?!"

"I did, yeah."

Not in a fair fight. But that doesn't change the fact I beat him.

"So there's no need for you to run," I said.

Nyaki's head dropped, like there were too many emotions running through it for her to process all at once.

I can imagine what she's thinking—now it's come to this, she's starting to pity the Sword of Courage*. Now she knows that I'm stronger than them, and almost certain to kill them, she's already begun to sympathize. Nyaki's view of the world is that, if there's a way forward where nobody has to die, that's for the best path to choose. Right now she's probably thinking of just running away.*

Without her as a key, the Sword of Courage *won't ever get into the Country at the End of the World. They won't be able to kill the monsters and demi-humans that live there. If we run away with Nyaki now, nobody else has to die. That's probably what she wants.*

But the Sword of Courage *are a covert unit of that Goddess. I can't have them standing in my way in the future. We're bound to clash again at some point, so better to take them down now. Besides, I can't overlook the things that they did to Nyaki and to the Speed Clan.*

"Sorry Nyaki," I said, turning in the direction of the remaining *Sword of Courage* members. "I'm not the kind of person that can just let them run loose. I can't be as forgiving as you are."

She raised her head.

"Too-ka-san..." Nyaki's voice sounded feeble—she was exhausted.

From what she told me, there's no saving any of these people. None of them were kind to her, not one. But Nyaki can find kindness in her heart for them, even though they caused her so much misery. Nyaki's overflowing with kindness—but they hurt her nonetheless.

"I just want you to hold on to that kindness of yours—to treasure it. There are people your kindness can save, I'm sure of it."

I beckoned Piggymaru with a flick of my fingers, and the little slime dove back into my robes. I took Slei with me this time, too.

"Seras, I'm counting on you to protect Nyaki again. We're up against seven of them—they might have split up to search the forest."

"You really think so?" Seras asked.

"Yeah. If that happens, your sword is going to stand between them and Nyaki. The strongest bloodsport warrior in the world said your swordplay has incredible potential, didn't she? That's what's going to protect her."

"Leave it to me. I will do everything in my power to aid you."

"Right. Let's go, Slei." I walked away, and Slei followed.

I looked up at the sky, the evening dark had set in above us.

Night—this is my time.

I'm sure if I tried to fight them head-on in battle, they'd have the upper hand. Civit never mentioned the Sword of Courage *as a group he wanted to fight, but maybe he never knew about them. They aren't like Civit, known across the continent. One thing I do know is that they're so strong that humanoid types turn and run from them. That can't be denied. I, on the other hand, could never win in a fair fight against a humanoid type. They aren't an enemy I can afford to underestimate.*

But even then...I don't think I'm going to be satisfied with just "killing" them.

The Speed Clan… Eve's parents… I heard from Eve her memories of the days they spent together. They were good people. Really good people. Especially Eve's parents. The more I heard, the more they reminded me of my foster parents.

"And those assholes *enjoyed* killing them."

I kept walking, drawing the Lord of the Flies mask from my bag and putting it on.

“It’s time to pay that back in full.”

Some people might think me cruel—criticize me as a monster. But from here on out…no mercy.

Chapter 5:
The Devil That Slaughters All

LEWIN SEALE

"THEY'RE LATE." Lewin looked off in the direction Toado and Birdwitcher had set off to scout.

"She mighta run further than we thought," said Yugung, wiping the blood from his axe.

"We should have hurt her more, if this was going to be the result..." said Miana, reflecting on their mistakes.

"It is as you say," agreed Satsuki. "I warned you—suggested we cut out her eyes just in case."

Hearing the scolding tone in his voice directed toward him, Lewin deflated. "You were right after all, Satsuki. We were so kind to her. I never expected she would flee. That she would betray us in the end. It's all too cruel."

Miana's expression was pained, her beautiful eyebrows downturned sharply.

"I can't believe her! And this, after you gave her the job of luggage carrier out of the kindness of your own heart, Lewin! What in the world did she have to complain about?! To stab us in the back like this…she's the worst! Pure scum!"

"N-now now, Miana," Alaine calmed her. "Look, I mean, she isn't even human. Just a dumb beast that somebody's taught to do tricks, right? Maybe it was wrong to expect anything of her?"

Miana placed her hands on her hips and pouted. "Well, I suppose so, but…"

Karo patted her lightly on the back. "It's fine, Miana. Might take a while, but Toado and Bird are going to hunt down that garbage and bring her back. Let's take her eyes out when they return, eh? I'll carry the luggage."

Alaine gave a little laugh.

"If you're the one with the backpack, I know my pots and pans can rest easy."

"I'm not gonna get tired out like that sub-human trash now, am I?"

“I-I’m going to be honest, okay? I didn’t actually want Nyaki carrying my things at all. I mean I didn’t want her touching the pans…”

“Well, it does make perfect sense that you would feel that way,” said Nannatott, nodding in agreement.

With all of them on the same page, the atmosphere among the group was beginning to settle down, when Satsuki cut in.

“You’re all thinking too much about the feelings of others. You’re getting soft, Lewin.”

“…I know,” Lewin readily admitted. “Nyaki may be a sub-human, but she still belongs to Vicius. That’s why I buried my desire to murder her deep inside. And also why I tried to educate her in my own way, devoting myself to shaping her into a tool to be of whatever limited use she could be. But…this is the result. Nyaki has betrayed us. She’s just a feral sub-human after all. Just like the Speed Clan. Damn her—damn them all!”

Lewin punched a nearby tree with a clenched fist, causing the thick trunk to shake and shower leaves down upon him. His vision blurred, distorted by bitter tears.

“Please Lewin, don’t blame yourself!” Miana ran over and clutched his arm.

“Miana… I-I…”

“It’s okay!” She embraced him. “We all love you! Satsuki he… he’s just saying that because he’s worried about you. You know that, don’t you? Satsuki loves you too, even if he doesn’t say it. Perhaps even more than we do.”

Satsuki snorted in response.

“But I…”

“First let’s confirm that this Country at the End of the World exists with our own eyes, okay? Then we’ll join up with the elites from Alion and together—wipe those sub-humans off the continent.” Miana placed both hands on his shoulders turned to look him dead in the eyes. “Keep it together. You’re our symbol—the Sword of Courage, remember?”

“Miana…”

“We’re going to save humanity from the dangerous seeds of evil, aren’t we?” Miana’s smile was reassuring. “You can do this—I guarantee it.”

Lewin wiped his tears with his sleeve—his eyes which were red

from crying, now shone brighter than ever. “Sorry Miana. I lost heart for a moment there.”

Alaine, who had been watching over them both, smiled a little self-deprecating smile.

“I can’t win. I really can’t,” she mumbled to herself.

“Giving up?” asked Yugung, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“No. I’m going to keep trying a bit longer.”

“Right then…I’m cheering for you.”

“Thanks, Yugung.”

“Gah hah hah, I’ve got a bet going with Bird after all! I’m gonna be out of pocket money if you lose!”

“Y-You! I can’t believe you, Yugung!”

Everyone laughed at the sight of them arguing. Almost everyone.

“What’s wrong, Lewin?”

“It’s just…I’m remembering how fun it is just being with you all. With nothing else in our way. I’m happy, it’s just…”

“You think it would be better if Nyaki didn’t come back?”

“As much as it pains me, until we open the door to the Country at the End of the World we don’t have that option. There is one more divine beast in the world, but Vicius-sama seems to want to keep that one back in reserve. We’ll have to endure Nyaki for now.”

“You’re so tolerant, Lewin. You’re such a splendid example to us all.”

Lewin looked down at the ground, disappointment on his face. “Nyaki was just like the Speed Clan, in the end.”

“Yes. It turns out she was.”

“There’s nothing we can do to educate them when they get like that. I thought we were getting through to her—and now we have no choice but to destroy her after all.”

Miana poked him in the center of his forehead with her fingertip.

“Huh?”

“You were frowning again. Your eyebrows.”

“Ah…”

“When we finished off the Speed Clan, do you remember what you said to us back then?” Miana smiled, and Lewin understood which

words it was that she meant.

"You're right. We can't kill Nyaki with hate alone, can we?"

"No, we can't—nor those living in the Country at the End of the World."

"Thanks Miana." Lewin looked at the other members of his group, who had been listening to the two of them talk. Yugung grinned and nodded at him. Alaine smiled too, and bobbed her head up and down. Satsuki snorted, and lowered his head a little in assent. Karo grinned, closing one eye and sticking out his upturned thumb. Nannatott showed he understood by stroking his chin.

Lewin's eyes had completely regained their usual sparkle.

"You're right. We can't kill Nyaki, or those in the Country at the End of the World, with only hate in our hearts. That would just be too sad. We…" Lewin Seale felt a renewed sense of purpose flooding his chest, and a cheerful smile appeared on his face. "Let's find a way to enjoy it, okay?! For Strife, too!"

With all that said, killing Nyaki and finding the location of the Country at the End of the World would have to wait until Nyaki had been caught and returned. Lewin and his group waited, but there was no sign of Toado or Birdwitcher. They were the two best trackers in the group—they must have caught her by now. Nannatott grumbled as the darkness of evening set in.

"That sub-human managed to get rather far on little rest. I've been depriving her of sleep for just such an occasion as this. Waking her up in the middle of the night, no less."

"Nyaki's probably been on the move ever since we said our goodbyes to Strife. But in the state she's in, they must have caught up to her by now," said Karo, offering his analysis.

But they haven't returned yet—something's wrong, thought Lewin.

"I knew we should've gouged out her eyes," said Nannatott, pounding his lap in regret. "She wouldn't have gotten far without those!"

"It's the ears, Tott. We should've taken her hearing away. We… we were too generous."

"Even so, it's strange that they haven't returned yet," said Alaine.

Lewin finally broke his silence. "Do you think…they encountered a humanoid type?"

“Possible,” noted Satsuki.

Yugung frowned. “Hmph, I figured the area we came through was safe. We smashed all the monsters we came across.”

Satsuki raised his sword a little from its hilt, showing them its peculiar gleam. “I’ll go after them.”

Nannatott stood as well. “As will I.”

“Me too,” said Karo. “Once I catch her, you’re fine with me bursting both her eardrums, yeah?”

“Now it’s come to this, I can’t stop you,” said Lewin with a nod.

“I will sever her ears from her head with my katana,” said Satsuki. “I won’t be satisfied with simply piercing her eardrums now. Don’t try and stop me, Lewin.”

They were all so furious with Nyaki after her escape that they wanted to kill her as soon as they found her. Lewin knew everybody there was thinking the same thing.

Strife’s death is probably all Nyaki’s fault too, isn’t it? he thought to himself. “I know how you feel, Satsuki. Just don’t kill her yet, okay?”

“Fear not—I will not cross that line.”

Nannatott finished preparing to leave, turning to Lewin for approval while brushing the dirt from his behind.

“I will crush her eyeballs when I find her. No objections, I take it?”

“I’m sure she’ll wail and cry when you do—but bear with it,” Lewin replied.

“*O ho ho,* you really are too kind. There is no need for worry.”

“I’m sorry for always holding you back, Tott.”

“You might be holding yourself back a bit much yourself,” Nannatott replied, laughing heartily.

“What should we do? Break her legs just in case?” asked Karo.

“Nah, then someone’ll have to carry her. Nobody here’s going to want to touch her anymore. Right?”

They all nodded in reply. Lewin gave a self-deprecating smile, as if he had just asked them a question he already knew the answer to.

“We’ll drag her behind us on a rope and she can walk on her own. If she gets slow we’ll have her give her some more education. But we know the location of the door now. It’s only a little further… just one more push everyone, please.”

The three members of the new search party grunted back loudly in reply.

Lewin and the rest of his party waited for Satsuki and the others to return.

"I wonder if they've safely caught up with Toado and Birdwitcher yet."

"They'll be fine, Lewin. Satsuki's with them."

"*Hah hah hah!* Always were a worrier, werentcha, Lewin?"

The place they found themselves was a clearing in the forest, dotted with stone structures that could barely be called buildings any more. The annoying buzzing sound of insects filled their ears, and sometimes they thought they heard the cries of birds, or perhaps of monsters far off in the distance.

There were a few low stone walls remaining, but they were all but ruined by time, and wouldn't provide much cover. Lewin and the others had no need for cover anyway. If they were attacked by humanoid types, Lewin could easily protect them.

Satsuki and the others aren't back yet.

"The day's almost done," said Alaine, looking up at the deep purple sky above.

The time when all the dark and evil creatures emerge.

The phrase flashed through the back of Lewin's mind. Long ago, he had heard it from one of the Heroes From Another World. Sunset was a time when monsters and demons appeared—bringing calamity to all who encountered them.

"The sky looks ominous tonight," added Alaine idly, as she stared up.

Lewin's heart pounded hard in his chest. His instincts called out to him.

This is... Something's coming. Danger! A threat!

"Somethin's wrong, Lewin," said Yugung. "I don't hear the insects no more."

"…Something isn't right."

"Lewin, what do y—"

"All of you, prepare for battle!" Lewin bellowed.

The other three members of his group jumped into action at a moment's notice, realizing something was wrong. Lewin's intuition

had caught on to something.

They had been together for a long time—Lewin's intuition almost always held true when real danger was closing in. They had been saved countless times by it before. The four of them formed up in a circle, looking out into the forest to watch their backs.

"Somethin' strong?!" called Yugung.

"I don't know—something bad. Something very, very bad!"

There were few details to go on, but none of them could afford to doubt Lewin's words.

"Miana! Use *White Noise* in fortress mode!"

"Eh?! I-I need to use fortress mode?!" asked Miana.

"Yes, quickly!"

"U-understood!"

Miana placed a dark purple gauntlet over her right hand, reaching almost to her elbow. The gauntlet was marked by protuberances jutting out from it like horns—a magical item exclusively for incantations, only usable by a chosen few incantation magic users.

Miana concentrated her mana, and the item's carved crystals glowed with pale light. Next a ring of letters of light appeared and encircled her. The letters were the words to her incantation, but Miana didn't need to read them—she knew them by heart.

"Seeing nothing, hearing nothing… You sinners, free and shapeless… Be beheaded by the six-named god of destruction, scorched by the Silver Maiden, the supreme magician turned noise… White Noise!"

Once she had finished, the letters were absorbed into her hand and disappeared. Above her in the sky appeared a square of sheet armor, two meters across. The semi-transparent sheet was patterned like a sandstorm, which moved some projection, blocking vision to the other side.

It was exactly as Lewin intended.

Miana created several of the armor sheets, adjusting her mana to hold them all up in the sky above them. She worked fast, as she always did—in an instant they were completely surrounded by a dome-like shape.

Fortress mode. Those sheets form a defensive wall above us—used to use them a lot when we were having trouble in fights. After a while I guess we stopped needing them though.

"How long has it been since we've used fortress mode, huh?" asked Yugung, peeking out carefully through a gap in the sheets.

They found themselves in a misshapen dome, but it wasn't airtight. There was enough space for one to squeeze through here and there. It was impossible from the outside to get a good glimpse of anyone inside, though. To do that, one would have to approach closely.

"…"

Why is it that my instincts are telling me I shouldn't let the enemy get a full view of us. But why? Would it be fine if the enemy could only see our legs, or upper bodies?

They were surrounded by darkness now. And with nightfall any enemy's field of vision would narrow and they would lose depth perception.

If we want to avoid anyone getting a good look at us, should we just wait here until it gets completely dark out there?

No… Lewin's instincts spoke to him again. *In complete darkness, you'll be at an even worse disadvantage*.

So our enemy can see in the dark? We're up against some kind of monster then? The more he thought about the situation, the more the unsettling feeling churned about inside him. *How do we plan for this? If field of vision is going to determine who wins this battle, should we use long range attacks?*

Lewin knew that if he could engage in close combat, charging at the enemy headfirst, that he would lose to no one…not even the Strongest Man in the World. He remembered the words the Goddess had told him, a short while before she gave them their current mission.

"You and Satsuki-san are important trump cards of mine, you know. It would be quite dangerous of me to rely entirely upon those Heroes From Another World and the Civit after all. I require allies who will listen to reason, yes indeed. If the others someday rebel against me, I will need good people by my side.

"Yes, I wish to avoid letting them know that I have companions that are capable of crossing swords with them. I would like you to hide your true power from the world. The time is not yet right."

Back then, the Goddess had called out to him as he was leaving her room.

"If Civit Gartland is the Strongest Man in the World, then… The Sword of Courage is the strongest of the Heroic Blood whom I know. And

you have far more potential to grow than he—of that, I guarantee you."

From the mouth of the Goddess herself— I am the strongest.

Lewin Seale caught a glimpse of Civit Gartland once before. He knew it immediately—the weight of the truly strong.

But the thing that's closing in on us...it's different somehow. There's something abnormal about it. It's not strength.

Pure evil.

No point in trying to figure it all out now. For now...

Lewin steadied his breathing, and focused his mind.

I just need to trust my instincts.

That was the right decision, as it always had been. Lewin's intuition was almost like a form of divination. It couldn't be explained as simple cause and effect, but whenever Lewin listened to his own advice, good luck came to him.

Lewin shook himself back to reality and took a deep breath.

"Show yourself! We are the *Sword of Courage*—here on orders from the Goddess Vicius herself! Nothing good will come of confronting us! Maybe you're mistaken—let's sit down and talk first, eh? How about it?!"

But there was no answer. The darkness was deep and silent as ever. Alaine looked tense, as she peeked out of one of the gaps from inside their dome.

"Hey Lewin. Satsuki and the others…they're okay, aren't they?"

"Maybe they haven't come across this thing yet. Maybe it's just us."

"What do you think? Is that a humanoid type out there?" asked Yugung, holding his great axe over his shoulder as he looked outside.

"No, we aren't that deep in the forest anymore. We're closer to the outskirts. I can't imagine there are any humanoid types around here more threatening than the ones we killed earlier."

Miana turned pale, and swallowed before speaking. "Then what in the world…"

"It's possible that it's because we're close to the Country at the End of the World," suggested Lewin.

"You mean they've sensed us coming, and struck out at us first?!"

"Potentially."

“Come on! You mean those sub-human trash aren’t just holed up and cowering here?!”

Are the monsters and demi-humans of the Country at the End of the World really this intimidating? That doesn’t seem right. Nothing about this presence feels complacent like them. They ran from battle! Ran like cowards to make a fleeting paradise for themselves here at the end of the world.

Could this possibly be them, then…?

“It’s just like Vicius-sama said.”

“Lewin?”

“They have to be destroyed, everyone that lives in this Country at the End of the World.”

This sinister, ominous presence…I wouldn’t be surprised to find out it was the Demon King out there. But, if this really was the Demon King some of us would’ve felt the effects of his essence by now. Who is it out there really?

“…!”

The other three realized it too, just after Lewin did. A faint rustling reached their ears.

“Someone’s coming.”

The wind began to blow, setting the trees swaying and masking the footsteps. Lewin concentrated his hearing even more.

“Graaah…!”

A voice.

Lewin put his back to the wall. “Is that a monster?”

He narrowed his eyes, trying to find the source of the noise. A cracking and rustling in the gloom.

The cracking of branches underfoot. The rustling of leaves. It can’t be the others—they would never be this careless.

“Satsuki!” he called out.

Satsuki came into view and Lewin noticed the change in him immediately.

“S-satsuki?”

“Grraaa! Ghaaah!”

“Satsuki?!”

There was no question that it was Satsuki shambling to them in the darkness, and he was picking up speed as he approached. But

something was clearly wrong. His eyes had rolled back in his head, and there was spit flying from his mouth. He held his katana in one hand, but his balance was uneven, nothing like his normal stride.

And there was blood dripping from the blade. He had been fighting.

"Satsuki, what happened?!"

They called to him, but Satsuki didn't stop. It didn't appear that he was scared—it looked as if he had lost his mind.

"Hey Lewin, th-there's something wrong with him!"

"Y-yeah…"

But what am I supposed to do about it? Monsters I can just cut down, but that's my friend out there charging at me. He doesn't look like himself, but that doesn't change that it's still Satsuki.

"Ghaaah!"

He collided with the wall of noise, making Yugung jump in instinctive surprise. Satsuki was knocked back and rolled to the ground, but quickly got to his feet.

"Gh-u graaah!"He thrust his katana through a gap in the dome.

"Hey, stop it, Satsuki! You don't recognize us?!"

Lewin bit his lip, parrying Satsuki's blade with the flat of his sword. They all backed away from the side of the dome that he was attacking them from, but Satsuki circled around to a point where he could reach inside and Lewin was forced to parry another wild thrust of his sword.

"What's been done to you, Satsuki?! What happened?!"

"Graah! Gah! Gahh!"

He neither ceased his attack, nor acknowledged their desperate pleas for an explanation. If he turned his body sideways, he would be able to slip in through the wall of noise—that much was plain for all of them to see—yet Satsuki seemed to believe he couldn't get inside.

Lewin's breathing was ragged and uneven.

"What is…what's this murderous intent I feel? Why are you trying to…"

"N-Nooo! I hate this! No, no, nooo!" Alaine crouched down on the ground, holding her head and screaming. The blood drained from Miana's face, and she looked over to Lewin for help.

"Wh-what do we do, Lewin?! Isn't there something we can try?! Hey!"

“Karo and Nannatott…” he replied slowly.

“Eh?”

“Where are Karo and Nannatott?” Miana began to tremble, her teeth chattering like she was freezing cold. “Lewin, you don’t think… the blood on Satsuki’s katana…?”

He bit his lip, twisting his face up in grief. “W-we don’t know that yet!”

Despair began to set in, spreading across their faces.

If even Satsuki’s been reduced to this… The chance that the other two are safe…

“What is this?! The Country at the End of the World is so close, and now this happens to us?! This is bullshit!” Suddenly, Lewin realized something. There was something coming from Satsuki’s body, a kind of bubbling.

Is that an illusion? No, it can’t be. Bursting and popping... What’s wrong with his skin?

The bubbles floated up into the air and popped, disappearing without a trace.

“Grh, gah!” Satsuki suddenly began scratching at his neck with both hands, slicing open the skin with his nails.

“Wait wh-what are you doing, Satsuki?!”

He looked as if he was trying to escape some dreadful torment.

He’s getting weaker. Are those bubbles doing that to him? I…I don’t have any idea what’s happening right now.

Suddenly, Satsuki lunged for an attack.

“Wah?! L-Lewin! He’s getting in!”

Satsuki began to force his body to twist through one of the gaps in the dome.

“Wh-what are we going to do?! Just do something, Lewin!” Yugung held his great axe level, and then pushed it against the gap to try to keep Satsuki out. “Damn you! Come on, Satsuki! What’s the matter with you?!”

“Gaah!” Satsuki’s katana slashed through the gap and sliced off Yugung’s ear.

“Ahh! Owww!” he howled in pain.

“You cut him?! He’s your friend, Satsuki!” shouted Lewin reproachfully.

“Gahh! Gaahh!”

“Please! For heaven’s sake, come to your senses! Satsuki! We can’t let it end like this, we just can’t! I can’t bear it!”

But no matter how much Lewin entreated, with tears in his eyes, Satsuki would not listen to reason.

“Ghgah!” Another of Satsuki’s thrusts came at him, missing by mere centimeters. Lewin lowered his head, and tightened the grip on his sword.

There’s no other way.

“Satsuki…forgive me.”

In the next moment he slashed up. His strike was powerful and accurate—aimed squarely for death and nothing more. Lewin’s swordsmanship was too perfect for words.

Satsuki groaned and was knocked back. He dropped his katana. A light returned to his eyes—one which they all knew well.

“Lew-in...” Satsuki called out in his last moments.

“Eh?”

Satsuki’s eyes were asking why—in his last moments. *“Lewin cut me down. For no reason... And now I’m going to die.”* His eyes told the whole story.

Satsuki’s corpse lay in the gap he had been trying to force his way through. They all stood dumbfounded, looking at it for a while longer. Yugung was the first to break the silence, pressing a piece of cloth to his injured ear.

“Satsuki, he…he came to his senses in the end, didn’ he? Y-you don’t think if we’d waited a bit longer he’d ’a woken up?”

“Don’t say that, Yugung!” Miana glowered at him, embracing Lewin in her arms as he stood still blankly staring at Satsuki. “What the heck?! It’s almost like you think Lewin made the wrong choice, or something!”

“Tch! Lewin can do no wrong in your eyes eh? Never could!”

“You have more opinions?!”

“Shut up, yeesh! I’m the one who’s injured over here!”

“What’s with the way you’re talking?!”

“Both of you, enough!” shouted Lewin, calming them. “I know you’re confused, but calm down. The danger hasn’t passed just yet.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” said Yugung. “This is all because of Nyaki anyway. I’m sorry, Miana. This is all the fault of that piece of sub-

human trash."

"Y-yes, I'm sorry too. You're right. All this anger—it should be directed at Nyaki."

They joined hands, a twinkling in their eyes.

"We're going to catch Nyaki…" began Miana.

"…and make her pay for all o' this," finished Yugung.

They had been at each other's throats moments earlier, but now seemed to have returned to normal. Lewin breathed a sigh of relief, and looked over Alaine, who was still crouched with both hands over her ears.

"Miana, scatter some light spheres around."

But it was Alaine who stood up and answered. "I'll do it. Light spheres, right? All of them?"

"Yeah…"

"Understood."

She rushed over to her pack and started rummaging through it. Lewin smiled just a little at the sight.

I'm sorry, Alaine. You're so much stronger than I give you credit for…

"I'm going to make sure Nyaki knows..." she said, sweating as she picked out the light spheres from her pack. "She did this to us. She's going to take responsibility for everything!"

Lewin felt himself being swept away by his emotions, but somehow managed to control himself.

"Of course," he replied simply, before turning once more to the darkness outside. "We are the light of this world."

He glared off into the deep darkness, never looking away from it.

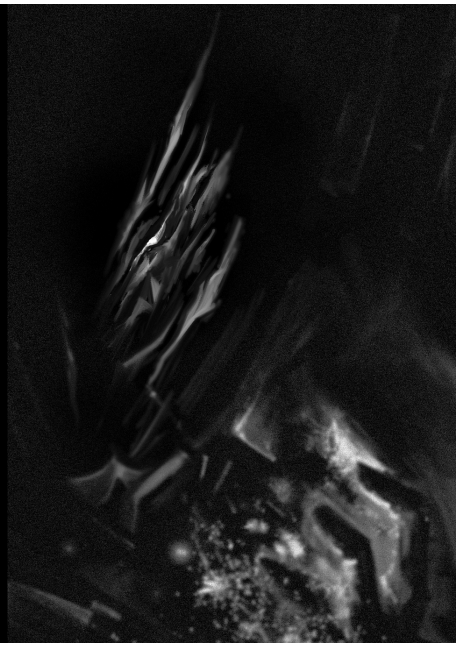
"We'll never lose to that evil blackness out there. We'll defeat it, and then—"

"Lewin? What's wrong?"

"Nothing, it's just…"

Was that my imagination? Something small, and very far away. I thought I heard a strange, distorted voice whispering in the darkness. Asking…

“ARE YOU
HAVING
FUN
YET?”



The light spheres in their hands were small magical items, about the size of pebbles—that produced light when mana was channeled into them.

They tossed a few outside through the gaps in the wall of noise, all four of them in different directions. They went both long and short with their throws, scattering enough to light the nearby area. No one worried if the light would attract nearby monsters—nothing could beat Lewin Seale.

Monsters be damned. We need to identify whatever is out there.

Lewin had already decided to completely abandon all compassion for his enemy. All four of the mercenaries were nervous as they waited under the dome.

"Let's enjoy this…" Lewin wanted to say those words, but it wouldn't have been right. Their situation was dire—more so than it had been since the day the *Sword of Courage* began. He looked over at Satsuki's corpse, still slumped down and stuck between a gap in the wall.

He turned away quickly, unable to bear laying eyes on it for long.

We've lost two members in such a short period of time. Strife and Satsuki…

But what about Toado, Birdwitcher, Karo, and Nannatott? Have we really lost six?

The only members of his group he could be confident were still alive were the three beside him. Less than half the *Sword of Courage* remained.

"Think it'd be too dangerous for us to strike out at 'em, Lewin?" asked Yugung, still stuck to the wall and wary of the other side.

"My intuition is telling me we shouldn't let the enemy get a full view of us—that's something we absolutely need to avoid."

It seems like the enemy doesn't know how to proceed. I don't understand why, but I think it needs to see us properly to make its attacks.

Is our enemy using the Demon Eye of legend?

No, it can't be. The stories might sound similar, but that's just a legend from ages past. It doesn't exist.

Everyone was having difficulty breathing—their nerves were frayed from being constantly on edge.

"I guess neither of us have a way to attack each other right now. Switch to your bows."

We need to use longer-ranged weapons. Anything that can reach outside.

Yugung and Alaine armed themselves with their bows and arrows. Miana had her staff already in her hands. Lewin picked up Satsuki's katana to use as a thrown weapon, gripping its hilt tightly.

I'm borrowing this, Satsuki…and I'm going to use this katana to cut off Nyaki's ears. I promise you that.

He looked outside to see bugs gathering around the light spheres they had scattered outside.

"It seems the enemy can't attack us so long as they can't get a good full view of us."

"You mean the reason they sent Satsuki after us like that is because they don't have any power of their own?"

"I-I think s—!" Lewin was suddenly hit with a wave of nausea. He pressed a hand over his stomach.

"Wh-?! Are you okay, Lewin?"

"I feel sick."

"Wh-what's wrong?"

"It's strange, but…this presence…" Lewin had felt it for some time now, a tight feeling in his temples, like his brain was being stirred up inside his head. "It's uncanny."

"Uncanny?"

Lewin's intuition was screaming that everything was wrong.

"It's not strong. It isn't strong at all. I should be able to beat this thing! Whatever it is, I can defeat it—but I feel so terrified of it right now!"

A problem right in front of me that I just can't solve.

"This uncanny presence…I think it's the key to all this. If we can solve this, then we'll understand this enemy and be able to beat it!"

"You mean, your intuition is tellin' you that?!" asked Yugung, trying to wrap his head around the situation. "The one that always comes to save us when things get tough?!"

"Yeah, there's no question about it. Solving what this presence is—that's the key that's going to lead us to victory! That's what my instincts say. I just know it!"

Lewin was panting, and speaking faster now. "They're telling me to live!"

Know your enemy. That's the first step to survival.

Is it a human? A demi-human? An assassin from the Country at the End of the World? A humanoid type? Could it even be another army, dispatched from Mira…?

None of those answers made sense to Lewin—none of them made the pieces all fall neatly into place.

He panted. His body was covered in sweat. It wasn't hot under the dome, but all four of them were sweating.

"Footsteps?"

Suddenly they heard galloping—all four listened out carefully.

"A horse? Here?"

Most horses are too scared to enter the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters. They can't bear the stress coming in. But that's definitely the sound of a horse. No! Two horses, no less. Galloping in tandem. They're circling us from the outside.

"There are at least two sets of hoofbeats out there."

Now knowing how many enemies he was up against, Lewin focused on the sound of the horses.

"Urk!" Lewin clutched at his chest again, feeling the strain.

"Lewin?!"

"It's not that."

"What do you mean?"

"It isn't coming from the horses."

"The uncanny presence—it's coming from somewhere else."

But those horses aren't normal either—their speed, the way they're pounding the ground as they gallop. It's unusually powerful—there's a good chance those are monsters out there, not horses at all.

I don't hear the whispering anymore. Was it just a hallucination? But…

"—!"

The pressure became much more intense—it happened suddenly, with no warning. Lewin acted quickly, stretching out his hand.

"Alaine, light spheres!"

"Y-yes!"

"Let's find out what you really are!" He snatched a sphere from her hands and threw it as hard as he could at the source of the new pressure, into the deep brush in the trees beyond.

It emerged.

Lewin's eyes opened wide.

"A s-slime?"

A huge slime was briefly illuminated by the light, then swiftly vanished back into the darkness. It was as if it had disappeared—but Lewin was confident he'd seen it, looming there like some imposing Slime King of the forest. He had never seen a slime that big in his life.

"*Heh, heh heh*. I get it...so that's it!"

Yugung turned around. He had seen the giant slime too, and there was a twinkle in his eyes.

"Lewin! That thing...is that the uncanny presence you were talkin' 'bout?!"

"Looks like it, yeah!"

Slimes were known to be weak creatures—enough so that most people could play around with them and crush them for fun.

Haven't seen them around in the forest for a while, maybe we had a bit too much fun squashing them back in the good old days.

"Some weak slime monster is giving off pressure like that. That's what's uncanny about it. These things are usually so puny. I wonder what change made it like that? I guess our enemy is this weird slime that has the power to drive people crazy! Alaine, more light spheres!"

More spheres shot out into the darkness. They all focused on the area they had seen the slime. It was surprisingly small now, and well sheltered in the brush.

"I'm not letting you get away!"

I can do this. Kill this thing in one blow—there's not a doubt in my mind. Satsuki, lend me your strength!

Lewin focused all of his strength in Satsuki's katana, gripping the handle tightly and preparing to strike.

All my awareness. All my sensations.

Lewin gathered them all on the slime's presence and took aim.

Target locked.

His arms were drenched in sweat, muscles crying out in pain.

"Squ-eeeeee!"

An unusually loud cry echoed out across the forest.

“What?! Jeez, that’s loud!”

“What the heck?!”

“Wahh?!”

Lewin’s three companions all covered their ears, even their voices drowned out by the noise. The monster’s cry was so loud, it almost sounded like it was being amplified by something.

“Trying to intimidate us, eh? Or afraid, are you? Either way it’s too late. Considering what you’ve done to us, it’s too late for forgiveness n—”

Lewin realized it suddenly.

The presence. Just for a moment it felt so bizzare—the speed at which it gained on them. He could find no words to describe it.

“Y-you…” Lewin looked over his shoulder, arm high in air as he prepared to launch the katana in his hand.

When did it happen? I didn’t notice it at all.

There was something peeking in at them, through the wall of noise behind them. A creature of legend.

The Lord of the Flies—his face painted red and black.

The figure pointed at Lewin. “Paralyze.”

“How long… How long have you been standing there?!”

That’s right. When I turned my head, I could’ve sworn I heard something...

My body! I can’t move!

MIMORI TOUKA

THE SUN HADN’T YET SET over the forest when I found the two men while searching for the remaining members of the Sword of Courage. From their appearances I judged that one of them was Nannatott and the other was Satsuki. I had no intention of fighting with them head-on of course, and caught them both unaware with a surprise attack. I think they might have detected me, but both were confident that I would be a weak opponent they could cut down easily.

I used my Berserk skill on Nannatott and had Satsuki cut him down, then used Poison and Berserk on Satsuki himself. Targets affected by Berserk that lose sight of any fresh victims to attack tend

to go in the direction of the loudest noise they can hear. I used Piggymaru to cushion the sounds of my own movement, and threw rocks and sticks to lead Satsuki where I wanted him—all the way back to his companions.

Satsuki was one of the strongest enemies I had ever faced—I knew that as soon as I saw him. I knew I would have had no chance against him in a fair fight. He was far stronger than any of the Elite Five members had been, save for Civit. But still he fell to my status effect techniques before I even had the chance to learn the meaning of that *Zanjin* name of his.

I caught him in my spider's web, and that was the end of him. All that was left was to wrap him up and inject the poison. It didn't matter how strong he was. Satsuki and Nannatott took my presence lightly—they probably detected Piggymaru as well and thought we were too insignificant to bother dealing with. All of them—they're only wary of the ones they think are above them.

I haven't faced a single strong foe who's been wary of me after seeing the clear gap between their own strength and mine—the weaker ones who challenge me from a level below might have more of a chance. The better my opponent's ability to detect exactly how strong I am, the more that ability comes back to bite them in the end.

I checked that Slei was following behind me as ordered, and led Satsuki on until we arrived at the camp of the remaining *Sword of Courage* members. My plan was to send Satsuki in to attack them, distracting them with their own companion in a berserk state to throw them off. I would cloak myself in the darkness and clean up the remaining members in one attack as they found themselves lost in confusion at Satsuki in his transformed state. If possible, I'd finish them off with a long-range surprise attack, using my linked form with Piggymaru.

Much to my surprise, they had set up defenses. There was something unnatural about the walls around them—they didn't look to be made of stone or wood. It looked more like some sort of wall of visual noise was being projected around them—like a sandstorm, or static on a flatscreen display. Probably the result of some magical item.

When I link with Piggymaru, I need to have visual confirmation of my target to activate my skills. The only one I can use without seeing a target directly is my Slow skill. And I need to see almost the whole body of the target I intend to attack. I could see pieces of them through gaps in the static wall, but I couldn't get a clear view.

Suddenly, I began to have doubts. Did they know how my status

effect skills work? They couldn't have. If that was true, Toado, Satsuki, and the others would have been able to defend against me as well, they would have been more careful. These people didn't know a thing about my status effect skills—they must have set this up in case of any long-ranged attacks. I still had the advantage.

Unfortunately, while I was evaluating the situation, Satsuki noticed his companions hiding in their defensive dome and rushed for it. If I tried to stop him, it would have just given away my position to the others. I didn't have control of him anymore. I needed to find another distraction, since that one was gone.

So, I altered my plans.

I left him alone to attack the others, and before long began to hear cries of distress from the dome. In the meantime, I set about making arrangements of my own. While I planned, I heard the name "Lewin" among the screaming. The other strong group member, Lewin Seale, was here. With Satsuki going berserk, he'd be very cautious about their defenses.

I needed to get close. Close enough to look through the gap in the white noise wall, get them all in my sights, and use my skills at point-blank range.

I retreated a little into the forest and gave orders to Slei, who was still on standby. I'd poured mana into her to change into her third form after we'd left Seras and Nyaki behind. I made sure to do it well away from them, so the light of the mana transfer wouldn't attract any attention to their position. And then I made sure she followed a good distance behind so the sound of her massive hooves didn't draw attention to me.

"Use those eight legs of yours to make it sound like there are two horses out here," I said.

Slei gives me a lot more options in combat. In more ways than one… Slei and Piggymaru are so important to my ability to create openings and distract my enemies.

"Keep a good distance away from the enemies. Watch for bow attacks, and ranged magic especially."

Slei brayed in reply.

"As for you, Piggymaru…"

"Squee."

"Once Slei has taken you over there, stretch out as big as you can get, then go right back to your normal size the moment they see you, okay? The aim is to get them to focus their attention on you."

I turned to glance over my shoulder once before continuing.

"Once you two set off, I'll call out to them—whatever comes to my mind. That should attract their attention over here for a split second."

I took their attention from Piggymaru and Slei, and directed it to me. Distraction was just another one of my magic tricks.

I pulled the amplification crystal from my mask and poured mana into it before handing it to Piggymaru.

"Once you've shown them where you are…" Piggymaru deftly took the crystal from my hands with a tentacle, and held it close. "Let out a cry—loud as you can."

"Squee."

The sound of Slei's hooves.

The giant slime suddenly appearing from nowhere, only to disappear a moment later.

The echoing, deafening sound of its cry.

And while they're paying attention to that—I'll rush up to their defensive wall.

"I'm putting you in danger with this strategy, there's even the risk of death. If you're scared, I don't mind you going back to wait with Seras and Nyaki. Don't worry, I won't blame you."

Neither Piggymaru nor Slei moved a muscle. *"What, you're asking us this now?"* they seemed to be saying.

I smiled in spite of myself—grateful that they were with me.

"When this is over, you can have my share of whatever comes out of the magical leather pouch." I nodded once in silence, and Piggymaru and Slei answered in kind.

"Squee♪."

"Pumpee♪."

I stood and put on my Lord of the Flies mask—our plan had begun.

"Squ-eeeee!"

Everything's going according to plan. And now…

"Slow."

I spoke the name of my skill as I set off running, Piggymaru's cry masked the sound.

My Slow skill applied a slowing effect to all living things in a radius around me—I guess it must look to them like I'm moving incredibly quickly. The world they're in feels slow and numb—even their reflexes are delayed. He might be physically superior to me in every way, but with this, I could get in close to Lewin Seale. This was the exact situation this skill was made for.

Slei and Piggymaru were moving through the forest without hiding the sounds they made—already making themselves targets for enemy attack.

If they do have any long-range attacks, they're probably getting ready to use them now.

I've got to hurry, but be careful.

Erase it until the last moment—my presence.

Pound the dirt as quickly as you can—sprint through the darkness.

A number of balls of light had been tossed from inside the dome during the encounter, likely magical items of some kind. They illuminated my form as I dashed out from the trees, but the enemies' attention was completely fixed in Piggymaru's direction.

I closed in on the wall.

Now they're in range of my Slow effect.

Be bold, but careful. Don't even breathe—sneak in.

"—!"

Goal distance achieved! Got them in full view—four of them.

I quickly dispelled my Slow effect so I could use my other status effect skills.

My arm was already outstretched, and in that moment, one of them realized.

His head turned to me.

"Paralyze."

"How long… How long have you been standing there?!"

Too late! This is the end for you.

"Right then… Let's get started, shall we?"

Blood spurted from Lewin Seale's mouth.

Shouldn't have tried to scream like that while he was paralyzed, should he. How did he manage to be that loud anyway? This guy really is a level above the rest. But losing his temper was a terrible move. His

internal organs are probably really damaged already.

"Emotional, aren't you, Lewin Seale?"

A black-haired swordsman—Lewin fit the description I'd gotten from Nyaki earlier. I squeezed through a gap in the dome and stepped inside.

"Nice place you've got here." The four of them stared at me, all rooted to the spot by paralysis. "But for the fun we're about to have, it might be a bit tight."

I grabbed Lewin by the shirt and dragged him outside, then did the same to the other three. Thanks to the glowing balls on the ground, the whole area was lit up by artificial light. I sat down cross-legged and looked at the four of them sprawled out on the ground.

"You really are strong, aren't you," I said to Lewin.

He's the real thing—even Satsuki was nothing compared to him. They're called the two strongest in their group, but there's a wide gap between them.

Fast, too. When I drew their attention away with Piggymaru's deafening cry, he was the first one to realize I'd approached. Awful personality aside, I think I understand why he's the ace up that foul Goddess' sleeve.

It's brilliant that I'm going to get to kill him here. …Just a shame that humans don't give EXP. This guy would've been a jackpot.

"I know all about you *Sword of Courage* guys. You're Vicius' covert unit, right? Nyaki told me everything."

Their expressions changed at the mention of her name. There was anger—no, an intense hatred that emanated from all of them.

"Oh, also…" I looked casually back at the dome, to Satsuki's leg sticking awkwardly out of a gap in the wall. "I killed Toado and Birdwitcher first."

"—!"

Lovely reaction.

"Well, I suppose that's wrong. *Toado* killed Birdwitcher. He was crying like a baby when he did it, y'know. Toado kept going on and on about you guys, tears in his eyes."

"Y-yh… 'm n-nevr g-h, bhf?!"

Lewin's eyes narrowed, and he glared at me in indignation as he spat up more blood. He tried to stand, but his legs gave out beneath him, and he lay down motionless again after the fall. Undoubtedly more internal damage was done.

Provoking this guy and having him hurt himself might not be a bad way to go about this. Paralyzed targets don't appear to take damage when I'm the one moving them around, only when they try to struggle and move of their own accord.

"Oh, and Satsuki killed that Nannatott guy."

"Gh?!"

"You saw the way he attacked you, right? I did that to Nannatott first, and Satsuki decided to kill him after he figured out there was no way to save him. Then I did the same to Satsuki and sent him in your direction."

"!!!" Their anger and agony came through loud and clear, even without words.

"One of them's still alive though," I said. "Oh, and…"

"Poison."

I set it to non-lethal mode.

Lewin's struggling is doing the job for me, but it's never a bad idea to weaken them up.

They began to suffer, and I sat there and just watched for a while.

"Wanna make a deal?" I asked finally. "Karo's still alive, yeah? I let him go."

The four of them stared at me, questioning looks in their eyes.

"He sold out his friends, you see—that's why."

"L-liar! -Ghgh?!"

Lewin jumped in to deny it immediately, damaging himself even further.

"Believe me or don't, that's up to you. Now, then…"

I don't know if they can channel mana while they're paralyzed. I don't want any of them firing off an incantation spell at me. Incantation magic needs to be channeled through some kind of magical item to work—the only exception being the unique skills of us Heroes From Another World.

I stood and inspected their gear piece by piece. I removed everything from them that might have been magical in nature and tossed it away, before dispelling the paralysis effect on each of their heads.

"S-screw you! Wait. I-I can talk?!" Yugung gave the usual response. The other three followed suit, trying to move their bodies

too, but realizing they couldn't. Yugung glared up at me from the ground. "You…who are you? Wearin' that li'l Lord of the Flies mask?"

They didn't even know that Civit is dead—figures they've never heard of the Lord of the Flies Brigade either. Not that it matters.

"Right," I said, looking down at them all. "I'm going to ask you some questions. I'll let one of you live—whoever gives me the best information, that is."

I saw the dread pass over their faces, and they exchanged looks.

"Now then, who's it going to be…aside from Karo, I wonder?"

"…Why." Lewin was shaking with rage. "Why are you doing this?! Did she put you up to it?! Is it because of Nyakiii?!"

"It is a mystery, isn't it? But more importantly, here are my questions. I'd like to know…" I proceeded to set out my questions. At first, they gave no answer and spent their time cursing at me instead.

Not that I cared. My acts were worthy of condemnation, that was a fact—but it wouldn't change their situation in the least.

"Nyaki, Nyaki, that blasted Nyaki! What the heck is she playing at?! She ain't getting away with a clean death after this!"

"We can't let this stand, the filthy beast!"

"We cared for her! Looked after her! This is just too cruel!"

But when they start cursing Nyaki—that makes me feel sick.

Lewin called out desperately to the other three.

"We're going to get out of this, everyone! Now's the time to focus our emotions together as one. To reaffirm our feelings to Nyaki!" Lewin continued his hopeless appeals to them. "We won't sell out our friends, none of us will! You've underestimated our vows, fly man! Your plan was doomed from the start to—Ghft!"

I kicked him in the side as he babbled.

"Reaffirm your feelings, do whatever you want. If you ain't answering my questions, you ain't leaving here alive."

"You fool. You know nothing of the strength of our bonds. Nobody here will answer you!" he cried.

"Right. But well, this is going to hurt more and more the longer it goes on. Let's see how you four hold up."

They're all affected by poison right now. Their suffering is only going to increase as more time passes. I've got the setting on "non-lethal" right now—they can't even die. The only way that could happen would be if one of the monsters in the forest here ate them…or if I choose to finish them

off.

All I have to do is wait.

I killed time by going through the magical items I'd taken from the group.

"Gh, hh... H-hey... Hey, you there!" Yugung called out. "What is it?"

With the effect of the poison, all four of them were clearly weakening. Now they were unable to even struggle against their paralysis, taking away their ability to deal fatal damage to themselves that way. I had explained all this to them, after I asked my questions.

It's a living hell.

"Wh-what you said earlier…is that true?"

"You're asking if I'll really let you go free if you answer my questions?"

"Y-yeah." There was a fear in Yugung's voice that hadn't been there before.

Now he understands. I'm not going to stop—never going to show mercy.

"H-hey, Yugung?! Don't tell me, y-you..you're not going to do what he wants, are you?!"

"Shut up!" Yugung screamed. "W-we're just gonna die if this keeps up! I-I don't wanna die yet!"

I stopped rifling through their things and walked back over to them.

"Like I told you, if you all got the same information to give me, then the fastest wins."

Lewin ground his teeth, staring daggers at me.

"Who would agree to help y—"

"Vicius' goal is to kill all the demi-humans and monsters in the Country at the End of the World!"

For a moment, the whole area felt icy cold.

"A-Alaine…?"

Lewin looked at her as if he couldn't believe his eyes.

"I-I don't care! I don't care if you look at me like that! I don't want to die! I don't wanna! I can't take it! I just can't!" she cried.

"Screw you, Alaine! What the heck's wrong with you getting the jump on me like that?!" Yugung roared.

“Who are you to talk, Yugung?! You’re the one who tried it first! I-it’s all your fault! You’re the one who made me talk!”

“What?! You’re tryna pin this on me?!”

“It’s your fault! I can’t hear you! I don’t care!”

“Th-the other divine beast—the Goddess has her! The Goddess is holding the second divine beast!” Miana cut in as Yugung and Alaine wailed at each other. “Worst case, it doesn’t really matter if Ny-Nyaki dies, because…because the other one’s being taken better care of!”

“M-Mianaaa! Didn’t take long for you to betray us either—jeez, you’re easy, aintcha?” shouted Yugung.

“Shut up, idiot! Y-you’ve been in a weirdly stuck-up mood ever since we got attacked anyway! You’ve always been proud and arrogant for an ugly guy, you know? It’s annoying as all hell! If we’re all gonna die, maybe it’s best you go first?! Just die already! Ah, I’m so glad I got to let all that out! It’s such a relief!”

“You can go ahead and die too, you whore! H-hey, you there with the fly mask! Don’t listen to these stupid girls, I’ve got better intel than—”

“Bullshit!” Miana interrupted him. “What?! You that desperate to survive?! That’s so lame!”

“The Sixth Order of Knights!”

The whole clearing fell into silence.

“Once we find the Country at the End of the World, the next force to be sent down here is the strongest of the Thirteen Orders of Alion, the Sixth Order of Knights! This is accurate information! I’m the only one that can verify it!”

Yugung, Alaine, Miana—all three of them were speechless, just staring in shock.

“L-Lewin…?”

“Come on everyone, let’s think logically about this,” said Lewin.

“Huh?”

“Think about the future… I’m the most powerful and talented among us! I’m the one that should survive. I’m sorry, but this is the only choice I have.”

“W-w-what?!” Miana turned purple with rage as she shouted at him. “What are you saying now?! You think you get to decide?! What the heck?! What happened to the bonds between us?! Hey!”

Lewin bit his lip in frustration. “I don’t want to say this…but there’s nobody here better suited to survive than me. I’m the one that’s got the information he wants, too—Goddess Vicius gave all her orders directly to me. Like I said, I know things that you three don’t. It pains me, but I want you to accept this. This is what it means—these are the bonds between us.”

“You’re bringing up bonds now?! Y-you just want to save your own skin! You’re the worst! You can go die as well, Lewin!” shouted Alaine in a fit of rage. “Aaah, it’s all a lie! Everything he’s saying! They’re all lies! Lewin’s making it all up! I’m the only one telling the truth! Everyone else is just feeding you lies to save themselv—”

Lewin continued, “We were instructed to be careful to kill all the members of the Forbidden Words Clan on our mission to the Country at the End of the World! I think they’ve gotten to be an inconvenience to Vicius!”

“Shut up, Lewin! I’m talking now, me! *I’m* talking!”

Lewin completely ignored her wailing and continued to speak. “We’ve already informed Goddess Vicius of the location of the door to the Country at the End of the World! Sent her a message by magical war pigeon about half a day ago!”

He called, raised his voice to be heard over Alaine’s screaming.

“…”

Tch… So they already passed the message on to that foul Goddess, huh. Would’ve been perfect if I’d been able to crush them before they even found it.

I proceeded to have them spill all the information they had, competing with each other all the while. At times they would curse each other, and at others would cut each other off and steal the chance to spill intel that another was about to reveal.

Not much fun for me to watch, but this method’s gotten me most of the information I need. I thought they were pretty loyal to that foul Goddess at first, but not so much now.

“You must really want me to spare you, huh.”

Their breathing quickened slightly.

“Thanks to you, I’ve got the information I came for. I’ll dispel the Poison effect on you.” The suffering faded from their expressions. “Now, as for who I’m going to let live—why do you think I dispelled poison on all four of you, instead of just letting one of you go?”

The four Sword of Courage members didn’t appear to understand what I was saying.

“I’m going to give you another chance. I’ll ask you a question, and I want all the information you can possibly give me. Depending on what you say—I might even let all four of you go free.”Their expressions flipped—waiting silently to hear what it was I would ask.

“Tell me about the Speed Clan.”

Their faces turned to confusion almost immediately.

I suppose they think this question’s strange compared to the ones I opened with.

“I’m not the most patient man,” I said. “Hurry up and talk before I change my mind.”

Then they rushed to speak, recollecting their memories of the destruction of the Speed Clan. They no longer interrupted each other now—they seemed perfectly in sync, each naturally taking their turns in the conversation. They even began to apologize to each other, and settle their earlier argument.

“I-I’m sorry about that. I was so confused.”

“Yeah, I went too far as well. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it…any of it. I was so panicked, thinkin’ I might die here.”

“I’m sorry too. Really.”

“No, I’m the one who should be apologizing. It was unworthy of me—foolish. Let me be the first to say sorry. I really mean it. I just thought of the mission. Carrying out the tasks that Vicius gave us to accomplish, no matter what. That was all I could think of.”

“Heh heh, we know. It’s okay, Lewin.”

“Miana…thank you.”

“W-we can start over, can’t we?”

“Course we can! I mean Nyaki’s the one that drove us to this, we ain’t done anything wrong!”

“Yes, you’re right! How could we forget something so important?”

“Things can go back to how they were, right?”

“Yeah. We’re going to start over, right now. For all our friends who are gone.”

“…”

Jeez. These guys have no shame. When everything’s going well they’re drunk on their own friendship, but as soon as things go south their true natures come out. The switch happens so fast. So, all those insults from earlier can just be completely forgotten about, just like that?

“Come on now, everyone! Let’s tell that guy in the fly mask everything he wants to hear! All the wonderful memories!”

They spoke. They told me things…things that made me sick to my stomach.

I should listen to this. I should learn exactly what kind of end the Speed Clan—that Eve’s parents—came to. I owe it to her.

But soon I couldn’t listen anymore. I was on the verge of killing them all just to silence them. They just kept talking, completely intoxicated on the euphoria of what they were saying.

“Like I said, nothing comes from hate alone! That’d just be pointless! We figured we should try and learn to have fun while we killed them, that was the task we set ourselves! Ever since then we’ve managed to enjoy killing, that’s the secret!”

“Quiet.”

“Wha…?”

“I already told you once to shut up.”

Sensing the change in my tone of voice, the four fell silent.

I removed my mask.

“I knew it! Under that thing you’re a human, just like us,” said Lewin. A light came into in his eyes as if all his worries had just been swept away. “I can tell you more about the day that we began, but… was that enough for you?”

“Plenty, yeah,” I answered.

“Right then… I’m happy to see you seem to understand. You were testing us, weren’t you?”

“…”

“Testing us to see whether we sympathize with those sub-humans. Those that should be rooted out and exterminated.”

“…”

“Don’t worry. Our hatred? It’s the real deal. We aren’t going to let it consume us, though—we’re out here still enjoying the hunt like we should be.”

“I know that now. I think we’re done here.”

“Then free us from these weird magic bonds now, will you?”

“And why would I do that?”

“What?”

“Why would I free you? You’re all about to die.”

"Huh?!"

Their expressions turned to shock and disbelief, when just moments earlier, all four had been confident in their survival.

"You didn't realize that when I took off my mask and showed you my face?"

This mask is meant to hide my true identity. If I've taken it off, that can only mean…

"No harm in showing my face to a bunch of people who are about to die anyway."

"I-impossible! You promised! You said you'd let us all go if we told you about the Speed Clan! Y-you…you lied to us!"

"I said that depended on what you told me."

"Wha—?!"

There's no way I'd let you go after hearing all that. I only asked about the Speed Clan to check just how scummy you people really are.

"Liar! Have you no heart?! Heretic!"

That's rich coming from you, a leader who just tried to betray all his friends.

"I'm just exterminating the people I don't like. Exactly what you guys have been doing, right?"

You're on your way to the Country at the End of the World... Killing whoever it is that lives there just because they happen to be monsters or demi-humans, aren't you?

"You wouldn't spare Nyaki, no matter how much she followed your orders…all because she isn't human. You never responded to her sincerity with any of your own. That's why I'm not going to save you either."

"Screw you! You're a monster! Die! "

"This guy's been brainwashed by Nyaki, I knew it! Oh man!"

"Liar, liar, liar, liar, liar!"

"Berserk."

I chose Miana as my first victim—Yugung and Alaine fell completely silent as she was transformed into a blooming flower of fresh blood and breathed her last.

Yugung next.

"W-wait…Hh-ghaah?!"

Now Alaine.

“Listen! Hey, you can do whatever you want to me, so—ghheh?!”

I stood before Lewin now, his own blood draining from his face as his comrades’ blood splattered him with red.

“E-everyone… N-no!” His head dropped to his chest. “So…so it’s me.”

“Hmm?”

“I’m the only one that gets to survive. The one you chose.”

You’ve got to be kidding me. This guy… He’s still convinced I’m going to let him live.

“Tell me, fly man.”

“What?”

“Who are you? Why are you here? Why are you doing this?”

“Let me make it simple for you: One of my companions is a survivor of the Speed Clan.”

“…!”

“She’s important to me and you killed her parents. You killed all her kind. What *ever* made you think I’d let you live? You sound so happy when you talk about what you did back then. You really think I’d just let you go? Besides, I’m out for revenge of my own.”

“Revenge?”

“That foul Goddess. I’m on a journey to get revenge against the Goddess of Alion.”

“Wh—?! Revenge against Vicius?! But she has always protected this world against the source of all evil!”

“I don’t care.”

To the people that have been sacrificed for something—no righteous cause sounds righteous enough.

“As soon as I found out you guys are some covert unit in the pocket of that foul Goddess, I knew what I had to do. If I let you live, you’ll come back for revenge. People who are out for revenge can be terribly persistent. Trust me, I know.”

That’s why I’m going to finish him here. Not leave him to the monsters—kill him with my own two hands, watch him die myself.

“Revenge? Revenge won’t bring you anything! You have to reconsider!”

Seems to be trying to convince me to change my mind. He really

thinks he can get through to me because both of us are humans, huh.

"Revenge will just make you empty! Nothing can ever be born of it!"

"Hmph, what are you talking about? I was born of revenge."

"Wh-what?"

"Oh, and that line of yours? Doesn't mean much coming from someone who's never exacted revenge for anything before."

"…You never had any intention of letting me go, did you?"

"What about you is worth saving?" I looked over my shoulder at the three corpses behind me. "When I said I would only let one of you live, you only tried to save yourself."

Nyaki on the other hand…

"Nyaki knew she was going to die. But she tried to save me and my companion, even if it meant sacrificing herself."

"!"

"It's clear as day to me whose side I should be on."

"P-please! I don't want to die yet! What do I have to do?!"

"There's nothing you can do. The second I found out you slaughtered the Speed Clan, it was over for you."

"Th-that Speed Clan friend of yours is a coward!"

"Excuse me?"

"If she wants revenge, she should come get it herself! But she's dirtying your hands with it! Pushing the job onto her friend! Don't you think that's unfair?!"

"I don't."

"Why not?!"

"She's made peace with what happened to her parents and the rest of her clan. She's a *good* person."

Nobody should be caught up in their desire for revenge forever. She's trying to move forward. Not like me—Eve is a true hero.

"I'm just a scumbag who won't let people like you get away with it. When I think of you living the rest of your life carefree…it doesn't sit right with me. And I've no intention of getting Eve wrapped up in this."

She should be happy now—that's what's important. No good will come of her meeting with people like this. She should live in peace with Lis. I don't mind dirtying my hands to make that happen.

When I looked at Lewin, his head seemed to be spinning, trying desperately to devise some way out of his situation.

"I…I'll atone for my sins! Mine, yours! All of humanity's! I'll recant everything I've ever done in life if you want me to! Everybody should be given the chance to repent!" he cried.

"Maybe. But I'm not going to give you that chance."

"Why not?!"

"Because I'm one of those heretics you've been talking about."

I pointed my arm at him.

"Berserk."

I stared down at the four corpses for a while. Then, turning my back on them, I placed two fingers in my mouth and whistled. Eve had taught me how, back when we were both living in Erika's house.

Piggymaru and Slei appeared at my call, and I picked up the cloth bag packed up with the few pieces of gear I'd collected.

No need to handle these bodies with Freeze—might as well just leave them here. The monsters in this forest will take care of them. I should prioritize getting back to Seras and Nyaki for now.

"…"

I stopped, and looked back over my shoulder.

"You guys kept calling me crazy, didn't you?"

I turned away and kept walking.

Man. People like me, charging straight to their revenge...

"Of course I'm crazy."

SERAS ASHRAIN

THE MAN WAS ALONE, a curved blade in his hand. Seras had detected his presence ahead of time and hidden Nyaki away in the nearby brush. She stood cloaked in darkness, facing off against the man in her Fly Swordsman disguise.

Seras' eyes were accustomed to the gloom, and there was a faint moonlight above that allowed her some basic visibility. From the descriptions Nyaki had given them both earlier—the man before her was Karo.

"A girl, huh," he said.

“Allow me to make this clear before you ask—I have no intention of handing over Nyaki,” Seras replied.

“Beautiful voice, too. Might be the finest I’ve ever heard in my life, y’know. So you ain’t gonna give up Nyaki?”

“From your tone, it hardly sounds like you are concerned for her safety.”

“You know what she is, yeah? Sub-human trash, that one.”

“Personally, I think you’re the sub-human here.”

“Said it now, haventcha. But you’re human too, right? Pretty strong one, from the looks ’a it.”

“You’re capable of gauging my strength, I see. I can see how strong of an opponent you are as well.”

Karo shrugged. “Seems stupid for humans to fight each other, don’t it? Just a guess but…I bet you’re quite the beauty. Your voice is like music. It’s sending shivers down my spine.”

“What is it that divides us?”

“Eh?”

“Humans and the other races. What is it that you think divides us so?”

“You…? Don’t tell me, you *ain’t* human?”

The simple smile vanished from Karo’s face and his body tensed for combat.

“And if I weren’t human—what would you do?”

All humanity was gone from Kato’s eyes.

“If it turns out you aren’t that bad-looking, I’d find a use for you.”

Seras took a deep breath in, and readied her sword.

Spirit armor—deployed.

Her armor appeared in place, and a sheet of ice crawled up the surface of her blade. Karo’s eyes were fixed on her—one hand on his mouth as if he was deep in thought. Finally, the realization struck him.

“Y-you’re an *elf*?”

He moved in the same instant the words left his lips, his sword dancing through the darkness.

“Now I don’t have to feel bad about doing whatever I want to you!”

Seras moved too. The hard clash of their swords rang out through the forest as she tried to parry her opponent's blow. Karo, on the other hand, launched into a second attack, giving Seras little warning by not telegraphing his swing.

"But man, all you freakin' elves are good for is living too long! And runnin' your mouth like that earli…?!"

Seras' first attack was nothing compared to her second. Her first had been a steady slash to meet Karo's blade. This time, she concentrated all her speed into the blow.

"Too slow."

Karo stumbled backward, both hands pressed to his slashed throat. He fell to his knees, breathing heavily but barely making a sound.

"My slashing technique pales in comparison to that of Eve Speed."

"Gh—!"

"A name you have heard before?"

Karo looked up at Seras with bloodshot eyes.

"The things you did to Miss Nyaki—to the Speed Clan—I cannot possibly forgive you."

Karo searched in vain for his fallen sworn, as his life drained away.

Then, with a sudden thrust of Seras' blade, it was over.

Spirit armor—disengage.

Seras took off her mask.

"Perhaps you were lucky it was me you faced." She looked down at Karo, her face as clear and cold as the bright moon shining up there in the night sky above them. "If it had been him—you might not have been sent on your way quite so gently or quickly."

MIMORI TOUKA

WHEN I RETURNED to where Seras and Nyaki were waiting, I smelled blood.

"Sir Too-ka." Seras sighed with relief when she saw it was me. "I am glad to see Sir Piggymaru and Lady Slei are safe too."

"Was someone here?" I asked, looking at the blood spattered on

the nearby leaves.

"Yes—a member of the *Sword of Courage*."

"Looks like you took care of him. Are you injured?"

"No. I did not suffer so much as a scratch."

"Karo, right?"

"Yes, though I have already cut him down and thrown him aside." There was a sharp tone in her voice. "I did not think it appropriate for Miss Nyaki to see the corpse. It's over there."

Karo must've upset her, probably said something about Nyaki.

"Good job. Look, I…I'm sorry. Leaving him to you like that," I said.

"Not at all. I'm happy that you trusted me enough to handle him."

"I knew you'd be able to beat any of them aside from Satsuki and Lewin."

Seras flexed her arm playfully in response, "I am the vice-captain of the Lord of the Flies Brigade, after all."

"Yeah, and I count on you."

"I appreciate being relied upon." Seras smiled at me like a flower in bloom, but she quickly regained her more serious demeanor. "Were you successful in your mission?"

"I crushed them. All of them."

Nyaki's ears pricked up. "Th-the *Sword of Courage*? Y-you defeated them, Too-ka-san?!"

"Yes."

"Myeoow…" It looked as if Nyaki's legs were about to give out.

"I got almost all the information I needed as well. I also brought back some spoils." I held up the backpack filled with magical items and other tools I thought we might need on our journey. "I only brought what I thought we'd be able to safely carry."

"If you've eliminated the *Sword of Courage*, does that mean we can rest easy for a short while?" asked Seras.

"No. It might be better for us to keep heading to the Country at the End of the World. I want to at least get a little closer."

That foul Goddess might make her move sooner rather than later.

"Nyaki…can you walk?" I asked.

She was wrapped in bandages in several places—the first aid appeared to be Seras' handiwork.

"I used some medicine that would treat the bruising, but…I believe we perhaps need to give Miss Nyaki a little more time to rest."

Oh, right. Nyaki needs sleep.

"Nyaki's fine! Nyaki can keep going!"

"Slei, do you mind?"

She brayed in reply, and a few minutes later, we helped Nyaki onto Slei's back.

"You can just go to sleep, Slei'll support you so you don't fall off."

"Ny-Nyaki can't possibly! How can she sleep when everyone else is awake and still walking?"

"Have it your way, then." I raised my arm. "Sleep."

Nyaki's eyes grew heavy, and her body slumped forward. Slei supported her weight as Nyaki fell right to sleep.

"Piggymaru—help make sure she doesn't fall off, will you?"

The little slime bounced out of my robes and onto Slei's back.

…I see. That little fellow can morph into a pillow to hold her in place.

"*Heh heh*, handy as always, Piggymaru."

"Squee ♪."

"How about you? Want to get some rest?" I asked Seras.

"Considering the location of the Country at the End of the World, the closer we get the further we will be from the depths of this forest. I believe we should proceed as far as possible before resting," she replied.

Piggymaru and Slei expressed their agreement with a squee and a neigh.

"Okay. Let's go on a while longer then."

"Are you doing well yourself, Sir Too-ka?"

"No problem. This place is a paradise compared to the Ruins of Disposal."

We came close to the area where the corpses of Lewin and his three companions lay, and skirted around it as we went. From the presences out in the forest, I could tell that monsters had gathered there, perhaps drawn by the lights or the scent of blood.

We passed by without incident and kept moving.

The sky above was showing faint signs of light when at last we stopped to rest again.

“Myeow? Yeow?! L-Lewin-san! Everyone! Nyaki is so sorry! Sh-sh-she just dozed off, and…?” Nyaki jumped awake, throwing off the blanket she’d been sleeping under, and froze at the sight of Seras and I sitting before her.

“You’re safe, Nyaki. Time to eat.”

“Myeow.”

I handed her some water, dried meat, and a protein bar from the leather pouch. I’d saved as much as possible while living at Erika’s house, especially anything that looked like it could be preserved for a long journey. I took the protein bar out of its packaging ahead of time in case that might surprise her.

“Ehm…i-is this all for Nyaki?”

“Yeah, sure it is.”

“B-but there’s so much?!”

“And it’s all yours.”

Nyaki began to bring a piece of dried meat to her mouth, but stopped herself and looked over at me.

“It’s fine, just go ahead and eat.”

Nyaki bit into the meat and her eyes lit up.

Tch… Just how little food were those scumbags giving her? Not to mention they made her carry all that luggage, and deprived her of sleep.

“Ack?! Ack!”

It looked like Nyaki had eaten too fast, and there was something caught in her throat. I stood up to help, but Seras was closer and stepped over to pat her on the back and give her water.

“You don’t need to rush. The food isn’t going anywhere, you know?” said Seras with a wry smile.

“Ny-Nyaki is so s-sorry.”

“Take your time,” I added.

Looks as if they barely gave her any time to eat either.

I tore a piece of meat off from my own hunk and chewed it over as I thought.

I'm so glad we found her when we did. If we hadn't, she might've died by now from exhaustion or lack of food.

"Wh-whatever is the matter, Miss Nyaki?!" Seras looked flustered.

Nyaki was sobbing—still holding her half-eaten piece of dried meat in one paw.

"S-sorry. Nyaki feels warm for the first time in a long time. Nyaki got this happy feeling all through her chest, and she hasn't felt this way since…s-since when she was living with Nee-nya and Mai-nya. Meow…"

She was smiling through the tears, thanking us over and over.

"No more thanks, just eat. Don't let it stick in your throat this time, okay?" I joked.

"Y-yes!" She smiled sweetly, her eyes still filled with tears. After the meat, she moved on to the protein bar.

"Wh-what is this? Nyaki has never eaten anything quite so a-meow-zing before in her life!"

Good—she seems happy.

"We're actually heading toward the Country at the End of the World. Through some connections we have a key that'll give us entry, so we don't need your help to get inside—but I'd like to take you with us, Nyaki. Do you want to come along with us for a while?"

"If she won't be a bother, then Nyaki would like to accompany you forever!"

"All right. If anything happens we'll do everything in our power to protect you—don't worry about that."

Nyaki lowered her head to the ground. "Too-ka-san—thank you! Nyaki will repay your kindness someday!"

I gave a wry smile in response.

"You're so formal, Nyaki."

Seras and I should probably work on straightening that out.

"Anyway…"

"Yes?"

"Those people—Mama-san, Nee-nya, and Mai-nya you

mentioned—could you tell me a little about them?"

Nyaki told us about her time as a divine beast assigned to accompany the Goddess' covert unit.

That means there's a good chance the family she mentioned—her mother, and her older and younger sisters—are residents of Alion.

I decided to ask for their real names, and for a basic description of them. I didn't want to meet them on the battlefield and kill them by mistake—that was always a possibility.

"Mama-san took Nyaki in and raised her. But Mama-san was old and died…" Sadness fell across Nyaki's face, and Seras gave her a comforting smile.

"Your Mama-san was a very kind person, wasn't she?"

"Nyaki loved Mama-san."

If only they both could've stayed together forever.

"Nee-nya and Mai-nya are alive, aren't they?"

"Y-yes!" Nyaki nodded, her eyes lit up. "Nee-nya and Mai-nya aren't connected to Nyaki by blood."

So only Nyaki's a divine beast, then?

"But, but Nee-nya and Mai-nya treat Nyaki like real family♪. They're really kind people. Nyaki loves her family!♪" she said happily.

"I see. It's good to hear you have a kind family."

"Meow!"

"What are their names?"

Nyaki's eyes shone with admiration. "Nee-nya's name is Nyantan Kikipat!"



Epilogue

"I WAS BEGINNING to grow impatient, *Sword of Courage*."

The long awaited news finally arrived by magical war pigeon. The Goddess had assigned the Sword of Courage to scout the area so long ago now—but after a string of failures, it appeared they had finally succeeded.

"The Country at the End of the World… *O ho ho,* this spells the end for that Forbidden Words Clan. What a fine day it is."

Vicius gave orders to her subordinates, an immediate summons. After some time had passed, he entered her chambers.

"You want *me* to head west?"

It was Tomohiro Yasu, his fingers healed by the Goddess after the battle. Luckily, he had not fallen into the sleep that her blessings could sometimes cause.

"Yes, in fact I have a very important mission for you there," replied the Goddess.

"A mission, you say? The Demon King's armies are yet to be defeated in the field. I must enact my revenge upon them! Why do you order me *west*?! Send Ayaka or another of your pawns to deal with it! This mission is not worthy of my attention!"

"Hmm, I wonder?"

Yasu's temple twitched, his face flushed with rage. "What are you playing at?"

"To be perfectly honest…and, this is just between us, you understand?" Vicius leaned forward and her expression was solemn.

"Eh?" Yasu seemed more attentive now.

"This mission is more important than our fight against the Demon King."

"…What?" Yasu's voice was quiet, and his expression changed from anger to interest.

"I considered asking the other heroes, but regrettably, I know not how much I can trust them." She sighed, and placed her hand over his. "But you, Yasu-san—*you*, I believe I can rely upon."

"Now I see." Yasu was trying to maintain a serious demeanor, but there was a smile twitching in his cheeks he couldn't completely suppress. "Very well. Kirihara and Hijiri are not capable, I take it?"

“As you well know Yasu-san, these S-class heroes…none are quite so adept at using their heads in battle, are they?”

“How true, yes.”

“Yet while you may be an A-class hero, your mind is so much sharper. If it were not for that fact, I would not be here offering you this task. You are the only one capable of it.”

The Goddess’ words had clearly left an impression on Yasu, but Vicius took care not to make any visible sign that she had noticed it.

“This mission is top secret. A mission that will shake this country, no, this *world* to its core. Can I count on you?”

Yasu snorted in response. “If that’s how it is, I suppose I have no choice. If I am the only one that can carry this out, then I must do so.”

Vicius grinned at him.

“Exactly what I expected of you, Yasu-san.”

When Yasu had left, she sent for the Captain of the Sixth Order of Knights.

“These simple-minded creatures—they can be so pathetic at times, but they’re ever so easy to manipulate.”

She ran her eyes over the scrolls on her desk. There was a mountain of them left to deal with. Since the descent of the Demon King, her work as Goddess had become much busier, and Vicius trusted almost no one—the humans least of all. The species’ foolishness was underscored by their brief existences, she thought. Before they could gain any true wisdom or enlightenment about the world, they weakened and died. A life too short for true intelligence.

Vicius placed a hand to her mouth, regained her composure, smiled, and put pen to paper once more.

It had been several days since Tomohiro Yasu and the Sixth Order of Knights departed, and the Goddess was working in her private chambers, as was her custom.

“Goddess Vicius, please excuse the intrusion!”

A man came stumbling into the room. Vicius looked up at him from her scrolls—one of her subordinates stood in the doorway, his face pale.

“My, my, to enter without even knocking, what am I to make of this? Ahem, movements from the Demon King’s armies I expect? Hmph, not unexpected. But this does present a problem. The source of

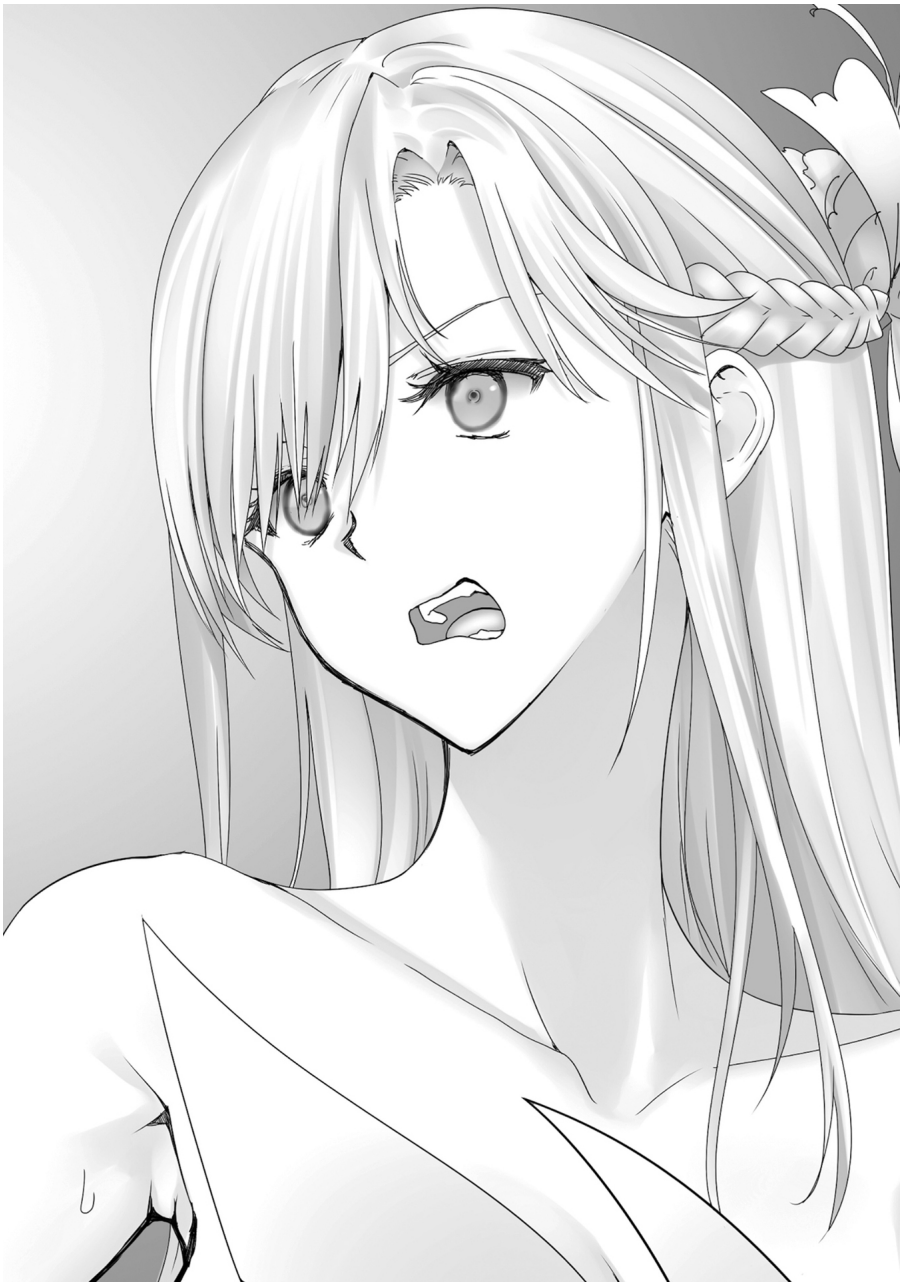
all evil this time around has been such a bother—”

“Th-that is not my report!” interrupted the man.

“You mean to say you’ve no news of the Demon King? What is it then?”

“Th-the Wildly Beautiful Emperor…” He took a breath to collect himself, then continued, unable to conceal his own shock. “The Empire of Mira has declared war on our nation of Alion! Their armies are marching to cross Ulza as we speak!”

“…*What*?!”



Afterword

RECENTLY, WHEN I pick up one of my favorite manga to reread, I can't stop until I've finished, all the way to the last volume. This is Kaoru Shinozaki.

You might be able to call this sixth volume one of reaffirmation for Too-ka.

Recently there have been a lot of moves he's made that paint him in a good light—his rush to the White Citadel of Protection to help Seras protect her princess for example. During his encounter with the Sword of Courage in this volume though, you might think *"oh right, come to think of it Too-ka always did have these nasty aspects to his character, didn't he?"* Maybe some of those memories are coming back to you now. He's out for revenge after all—Too-ka is no hero.

Another topic for this discussion should likely be the developments in Too-ka and Seras' relationship. In the web version of the novel, their relationship at this point is still unclear—or rather I skipped over parts of it, you might say. In the printed version however, I'm making sure to get all of it down. (Though given Erika's line *"Did something happen between you and Seras last night?"* it seems maybe she noticed what was going on, even in the web version).

Perhaps there are some of you who are thinking that after that night, it doesn't seem like their relationship has progressed all that much—they aren't so lovey-dovey, for example. I think that's about right. But…given their characters, I think that's natural. Too-ka's top priority is taking revenge against Vicius, and deepening his relationship with Seras is less important to him than that. And Seras for her part seems to understand that, and doesn't have any intention of getting any more intimate with Too-ka just yet (Though if she followed her desires, it seems she'd be willing to).

That said, their relationship has gotten to a new step, so I want to keep writing these printed volumes with a focus on Seras and this is one important aspect of that. I think the web version of this work is going to focus more on the tale of revenge (How that will turn out is yet to be determined).

Next I'd like to make some acknowledgements. To my editor O-sama, thank you for all your support. I would like to increase the rate at which I can pump these chapters out for you.

Thank you to KWKM-sama for the illustrations of Seras which always go on the covers of these volumes, and for always capturing new aspects of her charm every time. All the designs I receive are wonderful, but personally I especially like Too-ka's Lord of the Flies outfit. No matter how often I look at the design, I fall for it each and every time.

Thank you to Keyaki Uchiuchi-sama for your work on the manga adaption, for sending me drafts and letting me rediscover just how interesting manga can be. I'd like to also thank Sho Uyoshi-sama from the bottom of my heart, for all your incredibly detailed and dynamic work on the drafts. Seras becomes more and more charming to me with every word she says.

Thank you to M-sama (who is in charge of the manga adaptation) and to everybody else who has helped bring this volume to print.

Thank you to the readers of the web version of this work, for all your constant support—it's thanks to you that "Failure Frame" has come this far. I look forward to writing more in the future.

Last, thank you again deeply for taking the time to read this sixth volume. This book has come to print because you readers were willing to buy it. I would appreciate it greatly if you would come along as we sprint together to the end that will someday come.

Well then, I pray we meet again in the next volume, when potentially a lot more characters and powers on the continent will begin to make their moves.

—Kaoru Shinozaki



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